

Oli
A star bridge too far
By Carl Derham

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THUG FROM ABOVE

The day started in the usual manner for young Arnus. As soon as the first scarlet rays of sunlight cascaded from the snow-covered peaks of the distant mountains to the valley below, he gathered his bow-saw, backpack and axe and headed out from the family home to fulfil his first chores of the day. He really didn't object to getting up at such an early hour to collect wood, sunrise was the best time of the day. The birds were singing, the forest animals were gathering at the creak for their morning drink and wash. All was well with the world. This time of year was also exceptional, because for just two weeks, once the sun had established its position in the sky, the giant neighbouring planet, Amphora, would gradually rise above the mountains. It appeared ten times the size of their home star and in years gone by had been worshipped as a deity, which unless appeased, would devour the mountains. Appeasement was generally achieved, as in all good bourgeoning societies, with a massive party, loads of drinking and a fair deal of fraternising between the sexes.

Arnus knew from his studies at school that Amphora was a gas giant and his home planet, Phorissi, was a moon that orbited its super-massive neighbour. As their society progressed to the post-industrial, technological standard that it now possessed, many studies were made of the solar system that they inhabited and as Arnus sat on his favourite rock witnessing the spectacular display unfolding before him, he imagined that one day they would leave Phorissi and explore the many moons that orbited the mother planet and beyond. Maybe he would have significantly greater success with the females of other species than he did with those of his own. Phorissian girls wanted athletic boys and boys that could ride a hover board without falling into the school pond in front of the entire assembly. They weren't interested in genius-level science students with obsessions about outer space.

Arnus' father had built shelves all around his bedroom that strained under the weight of his vast collection of astronomy and science books. He'd learnt about the distant stars and galaxies that existed throughout the cosmos and had only recently got his head around the immense distances that separated them. Amphora orbited a standard-sized star in one of the outer arms of a standard galaxy and Arnus lived on the outskirts of a standard village, with a totally substandard love life for a teenage Phorissian.

For a boy his age, only fifteen, he had his future mapped out clearly. He would finish school then go to college to study astral physics and eventually apply for a job at the Planetary Discovery Centre. This would of course mean leaving his idyllic life in the countryside on his parents' farm, where he had spent all his life, and moving to Torian, the capital of Phorissi. This thought terrified him as he had only visited the city once as a small child. His memories of the visit were not pleasant ones. He had cried the whole time and begged his mother to take him home. There were so many people crammed into Torian, all moving around so fast and the buildings were so tall that they almost blocked out the sky. The very idea of living in a place with no forest or river sent cold shivers down his spine. He would however need to overcome his fears if he were to follow his dreams.

Amphora had now cleared the mountains but because of the overpowering light from the sun, the gas giant took on a ghostly hue. Arnus' concentration was broken by the loud splashing of an overexcited water boar, gambolling in the creak. He smiled as the creature entertained itself with the tiny eruptions of water made by its hooves. He sat and watched the delighted beast's playfulness for a few minutes, then looked at his time piece and realised that it was time to get on with his chores, so he gathered his belongings and headed for the forest.

He'd only walked a short distance when his eyes were drawn skywards once more. Just to the left of Amphora, a few hundred metres from the ground, the sky began to swirl. Not in the way that one of the frighteningly regular, magnetic tornados would form, but

standing vertically in the sky. The atmosphere was a glorious green as usual, with no sign of clouds, and this vortex appeared to be generating its own atmospheric irregularities in all the colours of the rainbow. It began to grow, and the spinning increased its speed, then a grey funnel shape appeared behind the disturbance and arced out to the edge of the atmosphere. Arnus had never seen anything like this before and he had spent many hours staring into the sky.

He wasn't afraid. The object didn't seem to pose any threat and the dangerous part of a tornado was always the tail that touched the ground. This entity appeared to be venting into space. He suddenly remembered his camera in the inside pocket of his bag. He always carried his camera, on the off chance that something out of the ordinary might occur nearby, and whichever way that you viewed this event, it was most certainly out of the ordinary. He reached into his bag without taking his eyes off the swirling event and felt around for the pocket containing his extremely low-tech camera. All the kids at school had the very latest in electronics. Communication devices that were also cameras with programs that could locate your position anywhere on the moon within a few metres. Utterly pointless, thought Arnus every time he saw his friends with these coms. Most of them never left the village and if they would only avert their eyes from their coms, even briefly, they would see the beauty of the land that surrounded them.

Just as he located the camera and pulled it from his bag, the end of the funnel began racing back towards the vortex. He had no time to even raise the camera to his eye before the funnel collapsed into the back of the swirling cloud. As it did so, the cloud exploded with a sound that was louder and deeper than any clap of thunder he'd ever heard. Arnus turned his face away from the bang as a shock wave rushed past him causing the short summer foliage to dance around his feet. The tops of the trees directly below the vortex swayed to the sound of an unheard symphony. The colourful cloud vaporised in all directions and a small object was ejected towards the forest ahead of Arnus, who was left with his camera in his hand, his mouth wide open and a perfectly clear sky over head. It was as though he'd imagined the entire episode; there was no evidence of it ever happening.

He turned his gaze towards the forest, where a plume of dust was just clearing the canopy. For some reason the thought of running home and alerting the authorities never entered Arnus' mind. He just retrieved the bow-saw that he had dropped in his hurry to locate his camera and ran towards the edge of the forest. The object must have landed a fair distance into the trees but as soon as he entered the twilight world, he slowed to a walk so as not to trip on any fallen branches. Arnus knew this part of the forest like his own flesh. He'd been playing in here, collecting wood and building dens since he was old enough to walk. He'd worked out from the dust cloud before he entered the forest that the object must have come to rest by the fallen trunk of a great pine that had been slain in the mighty storm of last winter. The canopy of the forest was so dense that nothing grew on the floor and the trees were well spaced, so it was like walking through an ancient temple with thousands of columns and the dark red roof of the canopy high above. He adored the silence that always existed within the forest. The occasional bird could be heard extolling its virtues as a potential mate high in the canopy, but generally the forest was a place of deep tranquillity.

As he approached the fallen pine, he became aware of smoke, or was it steam? The tendrils of white vapour were rising in perfectly straight lines from the far side of the massive trunk. On many occasions he'd had to walk around the tree to find wood on the other side and since it was about three hundred metres in length, it added a substantial time to his journey. So, at the end of the winter he'd spent an entire day cutting steps into the bark with his junior axe, allowing him to climb over the obstacle. He placed his bow-saw on the ground and pulled himself up to the first step, which was slightly above his head. Arnus was unexpectedly strong for his size and could easily pull up his own body weight several times,

it was his lack of coordination that would constantly let the side down when attempting to compete in sport. He crawled to the top and lifted himself to his feet, where he had a birds-eye view of the atypical scene.

The object had cut a path through the trees and a wide beam of sunlight was pouring through the ragged gap in the usually solid canopy. It had then carved great chunks out of three trees on its way down. One of the trees was surely going to fall with the next big blow.

The object must have been destroyed, he thought. Nothing could hit one of these colossal structures and survive. The wood from even the smallest branches of a giant pine would burn for hours, so dense was its structure.

His eyes followed the course of the object, laid out in the trail of destruction and there on the forest floor was a dark grey; so dark as to be virtually black, cylinder. The smoke that had led Arnus to the fallen pine, was pouring out of one end of the object, which for some reason he surmised must be the rear, because the other end tapered to a point and if it was indeed a flying machine, then the pointed end would certainly be the front.

Arnus had a million thoughts racing through his head. He'd read many books that suggested the existence of Extra-Phorissians and this was most definitely not anything that his people had constructed. He immediately flung his bag from his back and searched for the camera. This had to be documented. He could become famous and maybe even obtain a scholarship to the university. His teachers at school always said that he was a dreamer. 'He should concentrate on his science studies,' they would say. But that was who he was. He couldn't prevent his overactive mind from working, neither would he want to. He took a couple of pictures from his high vantage point and then placed the camera back into his bag and clambered down the other side of the tree. As he silently approached the cylinder, taking great care not to tread on any twigs, he retrieved his camera and took more pictures stopping intermittently to check that nothing was moving and more to the point that no-one was climbing out. The cylinder was two or three times his height judging by the rear that was fully above ground, but because it had carved a furrow through the rock-hard forest floor, the front was almost level with his waist. If it were standing upright, it would have towered six or seven times above him. He walked to the edge of the crater and peered down at the alien vessel. He had to stop a few metres away because the object was radiating massive amounts of heat.

That explains the smoke, he thought. The heat of the object was baking the ground on which it lay. He really wanted to reach out and touch it but he couldn't get close enough, so he picked up a long stick and gave it a prod. It was definitely hollow, because the deep metallic sound rang out for a couple of seconds.

Arnus was just reaching out to give it another prod when a section of the cylinder made a loud hissing noise, lifted from the surface of the machine and slid violently towards the rear, sending a loud echo throughout the forest. He jumped backwards with shock but when nothing appeared over the edge of the crater, he slowly moved back into position.

A large part of the object had opened, revealing the inside of the craft and he gasped as he stared into the eyes of its passenger.

Now Arnus didn't want to make any rash judgments about this visitor from another world, but it sure was ugly. Its massive mouth spanned the entire width of its bulbous head and veins protruded from its flesh like blood worms in a bog. And what was that smell? Arnus had been catching fish in the creak since he was a boy and he still hated the job of gutting and cleaning them. It was the smell that he hated most of all. And the smell that was wafting from the open cockpit of this mysterious craft was not dissimilar. The creature didn't seem to be moving and the eye sockets were so deep and dark that he couldn't really tell if the eyes were open or shut. It was fastened into its seat with two substantial belts that looked

as though they could restrain a charging sand beast, and its huge hands were gripping some kind of joy stick. There were screens flashing symbols that Arnus had never seen before, so the craft was obviously still functioning, which was amazing considering its rather inelegant approach.

“Hello,” said Arnus, in an attempt to make contact. But the creature just stared blankly back at him. It was either unconscious or not in the least bit interested in making conversation. He still couldn’t get close enough to reach into the craft, so Arnus picked up his stick and gave the creature a gentle jab to the torso. It still didn’t stir, so he gave it a couple of harder jabs. It was heavy. Arnus could barely move it with the stick. He was just about to give it a good solid prod when the huge hand that had been resting on the control, shot across its body and grabbed the stick out of Arnus’ hand. The creature tore the stick away from Arnus’ grasp, taking a graze of flesh with it and flung it out of the other side of the capsule. The giant hand returned and punched a button in the middle of its chest. The two restraining belts disappeared into the back of its seat and the creature sat up and turned to stare straight into Arnus’ eyes. Arnus stared back, smiled and lifted his hand in what he assumed must be a universal sign of greeting.

“Hello,” he said again, “welcome to Phorissi.”

Arnus was blind in his innocence of all things universal. He approached everything and everyone as though they couldn’t possibly mean him any harm, which was a commendable philosophy towards life. But in this particular instance he should have been afraid and already running as fast as his legs would carry him, because if there was one thing that would be guaranteed to put commander Grrghracksh in a bad mood it was being poked with a stick, especially when he’d just lost his ship and crew to an ugly little runt.

Sirens were ringing out across the deck of the super tanker Kapetan Georgos, men were running about closing valves and shutting down all manner of electrical devices. From the bridge, Captain Hollander was trying to assess the damage.

Thirty minutes before, he’d been sleeping in his luxurious cabin; Mozart’s Requiem playing softly in the background. He’d never actually heard the entire work because for some reason he always fell asleep during the Tuba Mirum. On this occasion however, he was woken by the apocalyptic cacophony of a fifty-thousand-tonne cargo ship called Aphrodite, colliding with Kapetan Georgos and scraping down the full length of the gigantic vessel. In all his forty-three years at sea, Captain Hollander hadn’t put so much as a dent in any ship under his command. The sound inside the ship of these two metal Goliaths coming together was unimaginable. He leapt out of bed, scrambled to put on his trousers and ran down the corridor leading to the bridge, frantically attempting to button his shirt as he went.

“We’ve been hit Captain!” shouted Giovanni, the first officer.

“By what?” the captain enquired, trying to contain the massive feeling of panic that was welling up inside him. He knew that the job of the Captain was to remain calm and sort out any problems that arose, but the sound of armageddon that had awoken him suggested something more serious than engine problems or bad weather. He was venturing into new territory and understood that he would need all his training and experience to achieve anything other than disaster.

“It came from nowhere Captain,” spluttered the first mate, “I only left the bridge for two minutes to go to the toilet, I checked the radar before leaving the bridge, then came back and started my watch on the starboard side.”

“WHAT HIT US?” shouted the captain, gripping both hands on Giovanni’s shoulders.

“I think it’s a cargo ship Captain,” spluttered his first mate, gesturing for the captain to follow him to the rear observation deck. From there, they could just make out the

dark silhouette of Aphrodite, already listing seriously to port. The closing speed and inertia of the two vessels meant that they had continued on their opposite courses after the collision and Aphrodite was already a nautical mile behind the super tanker. The only reason that they could see the outline of the smaller vessel on this darkest of nights was thanks to several small fires, that had broken out around its decks. It was going down; and fast.

Captain Hollander made a quick evaluation of the situation and decided that the crew of the other ship were on their own. For now, his main priority was to ascertain how much damage his ship had sustained.

They rushed back to the front of the bridge in time to see the communications desk lighting up from positions throughout the ship. As the rest of the thirty-strong crew arrived on the bridge or called in from some other area, the captain sent them to their various stations to report back any damage. Warning lights were flashing on the console. They were taking in water from somewhere. But the most important lights of all were the ones that would indicate an oil tank rupture, and these were, thankfully, inactive. The captain patted them gently, encouraging them to stay that way.

The deep throbbing sound of the engines had stopped, but the ship was still travelling at fifteen knots. It would take three or four miles for it to come to a dead stop, so the captain turned the rudder hard to port attempting to stay relatively close to the other stricken vessel. One, if not both, were going to need some serious assistance within the coming hours. He glanced across to the bridge navigation screen. Not that he had any doubt as to their exact location; they were about as far from land as it was possible to be, smack bang in the middle of the South Atlantic.

Just then the intercom phone rang. It was the engine room.

“Yannis here Captain,” came the strongly Greek-accented voice of the chief engineer, “we’re taking in water Captain ... a lot of water.” He paused for a response but when there wasn’t one he continued. “It seems to be coming in from higher up on the hull, probably a few metres below the water line.”

“Can you see the damage Yanni? Is there a hole?” The captain waited for a response, his heart beginning to perform an arrhythmic Bossa Nova. He waited and waited while Yannis climbed the steps to the next level taking him above the ninety thousand horse power diesel engine. Then he climbed again to the highest level in the engine room, wishing that he could put an end to his forty-a-day smoking habit and made his way to the port side. All the time, above the noise of machinery the captain could hear Yannis’ footsteps on the metal walkway. They were footsteps leading to an answer that the captain already knew. Yannis pushed past the four huge generators that were giving the ship its power and finally reached the inner skin of the double hull.

“Captain,” said Yannis, his voice revealing a level of concern that Captain Hollander had never heard from his catatonically calm engineer.

“The outer hull is obviously breached, and the force of the collision has buckled the inner hull, which has a hairline crack the length of the engine room.”

“How much water are we taking in?” asked the captain.

“It’s pouring in along the length of the crack Captain, then running down the inside of the hull. There’s no way that the pumps can handle this amount of water.”

“Thank you Yannis,” said the captain. “Turn all pumps on full power and keep me apprised of the situation.”

With that, the captain replaced the handset and instructed the first mate to send the mayday call, informing the authorities that the Kapetan Georgos was in danger of sinking. This was an unthinkable disaster for any ship’s captain, but Captain Hollander knew that if a ship carrying three million barrels of crude oil went down, it would almost certainly break up under the stresses and release its black death into the ocean, causing an ecological disaster.

The captain surmised that the bulb, on the bow of the smaller ship had hit the tanker at an acute angle below the waterline and continued to push the outer hull into the inner hull along a considerable portion of the ship. The first hour following the collision passed by in an instant and before he knew it, Captain Hollander was looking out to a rising sun. The first rim of the heavenly body was appearing on the horizon and Captain Hollander went to the rear of the bridge to check on the other ship. It had come to rest about three miles away, so he reached for his binoculars. The bow of the ship was completely submerged, with the propeller visible above the water. The sea was flat calm; he could make out two lifeboats leaving the doomed vessel and heading toward the Georgos. Seaman's code dictated that they would have to give refuge to the sailors, but the only thought going through the captain's head was to pull up the steps and leave them to their fates. He was close to retiring from an unblemished career and this bunch of morons had to go and drive into his ship. He instructed a crew member to go and meet them at the rear steps and take them straight to the medical room.

"I don't want to see or hear from them. Understood?" he stated, with an expression on his face that left no room for misunderstanding.

By mid-morning, the company that owned the ship, Trans-Atlantic oil, had contacted all shipping companies in an attempt to locate an empty tanker that could rendezvous with the Georgos and unload its cargo. But there were no ships within a thousand miles. The closest was a competitor's empty tanker heading back to the Middle East for re-filling, but that vessel would take two days to reach them. Captain Hollander informed them in no uncertain terms that their ship would be three thousand metres under the sea, resting on the ocean floor in two days. He ordered the engine to be run up to full speed and set the ship on a course to rendezvous with the other tanker. He would run the engine for as long as possible before it became waterlogged.

Yannis reported from the engine room that the pumps were working flat out but the water was still rising at an alarming rate. It was now over the grating that housed the propeller shaft and the spinning shaft was spraying oily water everywhere. Captain Hollander began to prepare an evacuation plan, whilst trying desperately to hide the film of water on his eyes. He knew that he wasn't to blame for the accident, but he was still going to have to witness his ship sinking below the calm Atlantic Ocean, every sea captain's nightmare.

During the week that Robbie and the ship had been hiding in the smuggler's cave, he'd increased the size of the central cavern and extended it to within a couple of metres of the cliff face, so all he had to do to leave the secret hideout was fly to the end of the cave and then matter transform through a small layer of rock. Oli and the crew had been enjoying a celebratory beer in their local, The Sailor's Arms, when a news report about the stricken tanker appeared on the television. Without finishing their drinks, they left the pub and ran up the hill towards the house ... well, they'd run about half way before the boys almost collapsed from exhaustion.

"We really must think about getting fit guys," gasped Oli to his wheezing companions.

"Good ... idea," panted Ed, grasping his knees with his hands. "We'll be surfing every day soon. That should help."

Julie and Sara just stood there shaking their heads in disgust. They had been members of a gym in London and would meet up for circuit training every Tuesday and Thursday evening. So, although they did party as hard as the boys, they managed to keep themselves in shape.

"What we really need," suggested Jay, taking great gulps of air, "is a house that doesn't lie at the highest point of the village."

The house belonged to Sir Rupert Evert, Stephan's uncle, and since they needed a secret base from which to operate, Stephan had persuaded his bumbling old relative to let them use the house. With its warren of underground tunnels and caves dating back to the eighteenth century and a time of smugglers, the house had presented them with a perfect base in which to conceal their secret.

Stephan had gone back to London to continue with his work, although everything that he believed to be fact about the pyramids had been disproven in a single swipe of fate and he couldn't share the secrets with anybody in the Egyptology department of the museum. He was starting to think that he may have to change his career. Who would have thought that the scruffy young man who he had sat next to on the flight to Cairo, could have upended his life in such a monumental manner? He wasn't complaining though. After all, his stuffy old life of museums and dusty excavation sights could not compete with his new life of ancient civilisations and inter-stellar travel. Obviously, Sir Rupert had no idea that they were keeping a spaceship, bequeathed to humanity by the dying Annenian race, beneath his property, or that they planned to operate a modern day International Rescue from there. The only proviso that Stephan's uncle had given was; if he wanted to come down for a holiday, the crew would have to tidy the place up and make themselves scarce for the week, or however long he wanted to stay. But Stephan assured Oli that this would never happen. The old fellow hadn't set foot out of London for years. He was a complete workaholic and spent all his waking hours at the museum studying Egyptian artefacts that had already been studied a thousand times before.

The crew carried on walking at a brisk pace till they reached the house. They went through the rickety door leading to the cellar, where they found the creaky old oak door that led to the smuggler's cave. Only now, there was no wrought iron handle or massive rusty key to turn. Robbie had built in a new security device to gain access to the secret lair. The door opened automatically, using voice recognition. They'd spent an entire evening over a few beers pondering over a suitable password to open the door, with ideas such as; 'open sesame' and 'let me in you nob'. But in the end, they had decided to keep the spirit of the old smugglers alive, and to gain access to the most secret object in the world, an object that could change the future path for all humanity, they had to utter the immortal word; 'Ahargh!' with a pirate growl.

The locking mechanism recognised everyone's Ahargh except for Sara's. She was having a few problems with it and it would come out as Ooargh, which was fine for communicating with the local fishermen and farmers, but would not gain access through this door. Oli had seen her on a couple of occasions practicing in front of the bathroom mirror, "Ah ... hargh, ah ... hargh," but whenever she tried to put it all together it always turned into Ooargh. This is going to be entertaining, thought Oli.

Ed, being first in line gave a hearty Ahargh! whilst shaking his fist and the door silently opened. The fist-shaking was essentially surplus to requirements, but Ed felt that it added a certain *je ne sais quoi* to proceedings, even though he had scored the lowest mark possible in every French examination that he had ever taken and really had no idea as to the meaning of *je ne sais quoi*.

Without a hint of creaking rusty hinges, the smugglers passage opened before them and two rows of tiny lights, one on either side of the tunnel at floor level, lit up giving the ancient walkway an unearthly glow. They pushed on down into the belly of the Cornish cliff, where four hundred years previously, smugglers had plied their illicit trade. They entered the cavern, which had been extended by Robbie and the drones to make room for the flying car that they had discovered on Annenia and various other bits of machinery from Cranus, the giant mother ship, which Robbie thought may come in handy. The cavern was illuminated by the same pin-prick lights that lit up the passageway. There were thousands of them all around

the ceiling and walls. It was like standing in the centre of the galaxy looking out at the stars, or so Oli assumed, having never stood at the centre of the galaxy ... yet.

“Righto.” said Oli, rubbing his hands together with glee at the thought of getting airborne again. “We’d better go and see if we can stop this tanker from sinking.”

He had no idea how this would be possible, but he felt sure that Robbie would come up with something smart. They rushed up the walkway, which closed after them, then made their way to the control room. Oli’s super-comfortable seat at the control panel was in its usual position but Robbie had added four more seats, two on either side of the room, so that everyone could sit in comfort and watch the screen.

“Hi Robbie,” said Oli, as he planted himself in his favourite position.

Oli held his hands out in front and mimicked using the controls to fly the ship manually, whilst looking expectantly at nowhere in particular.

“What’s missing from this picture Robbie?”

“I’m detecting elevated levels of alcohol within your blood, Oli,” said Robbie then paused for a few seconds. “I think I’ll drive today if that’s ok with you all.”

A resounding “absolutely,” echoed around the bridge.

The Graviton Generator began to throb, and the screen started shimmering as the matter transform bubble surrounded the craft, but instead of moving straight through the rock cliff face to the open air, the ship descended through the cave floor. Robbie had decided that in broad daylight, it would be prudent to exit the cliff face under water, head out to sea a few kilometres and then get airborne when he was sure that nobody was watching. He was planning to dig a tunnel through the rock straight into the sea so that they wouldn’t have to matter transform their way out every time, but he just hadn’t got around to it yet, what with sorting out the lighting and making the cave bigger and trying to top his high score at three-dimensional Galactic Larssey, an artificial life form’s work was never done.

After a few minutes, travelling through solid rock, they entered the dark, cloudy Cornish sea. Ed and Oli had spent many hours, bobbing in the sea on their boards, waiting for the perfect wave to materialise. They never imagined that they would be underneath it, travelling at over three hundred kilometres per hour in a spaceship.

Once clear of land and all ocean-going traffic, Robbie took the ship into low orbit and darted south. He locked onto the transponder of the Kapetan Georgos and re-entered the atmosphere at several thousand kilometres per hour. In the space of two seconds, the blue of the ocean grew in detail, the wispy cirrus clouds came and went in a split second and the black dot at the end of a milky white line of wake grew into the stricken tanker. They were heading nose down straight for the tanker and although everyone knew that Robbie would never dive straight through the ship, they all gasped in unison as he slowed from preposterously fast to stop, in the blink of an ant. They were now hovering just ten metres off the deck, immediately in front of the superstructure that housed the bridge. Robbie touched down on an open piece of deck. Oli noticed that the usual clunk of the legs was apparent only by its absence.

“What have you done to the legs Robbie?” asked Oli. He had been dumbfounded as to how the Annenians could build such incredible machines, capable of travelling through space at many times the speed of light, but when they came in to land, the landing gear made the same clunking noise as a significantly technologically inferior human aircraft.

“I’ve made some adjustments,” explained Robbie. “The comparison between me and one of those pre-tech flying cattle trucks was unacceptable.”

“Great improvement,” said Ed through gritted teeth, still reeling from the re-entry and currently gripped by a very personal struggle of removing his lower intestine from the top of his throat.

“Right,” said Oli, leaping from his chair with a clap of his hands, “there’s work to be done here. Let’s go up to the bridge and check out the situation.”

They all engaged their Go-rings. They all had a Go-ring now and could realistically walk through the corona of a star without any adverse side-effects. They had decided that whenever entering a potentially dangerous situation, that they would err on the side of caution and become ostensibly invincible.

Robbie connected with the ship-board computers and assessed the damage.

“There’s a one hundred and twenty metre gash in the outer hull,” he explained, as the crew headed for the hangar. “But before we can attempt to fix that, we need to repair the similar-length fracture in the inner hull. I’ve prepared two molecular welding guns for you.”

As the crew entered the hangar bay to the sound of the ocean and cool Atlantic breeze through the open gangway, a flap opened in the wall and two machines appeared that looked like the pneumatic hammers that road workers use to break through the tarmac. Julie walked over and rubbed her hands with glee. When it was time to get glammed up for a night out on the tiles, she was one hundred per cent girl, but what Oli really liked about her was that she had a grubby, mud-covered boy side to her, desperate to break free and dive into the first quagmire that appeared. Ed was his best mate in the world, but Julie was always first to get in there and get her hands dirty. She went to pick up the tool, expecting it to weigh as much as an industrial breaker. She straightened her back, placed one hand under each end and tensed her arm muscles in readiness for the strain. She lifted it so fast that it nearly flew over her head and she stumbled backwards to regain her balance.

“It’s as light as my hair dryer,” she explained, jumping around, pointing the welder at imaginary targets. Then she slung the molecular welder over her shoulder like some inter-stellar cowgirl. Sara grabbed the other machine and they headed out into the cool fresh air of the South Atlantic. Robbie gave them directions to the rear of the superstructure, through a metal door and up a noisy metal stairway that led to the bridge.

“Jay,” shouted Robbie, as the crew were descending the ramp, “You’re with me, I have a ‘special’ job for you.”

When the crew entered the bridge, the captain was leaning over the navigation table with his back to them. The good news was that land was only 3 kilometres away, the bad news was that it was straight down. He was attempting to calculate, with the rate of ingress, how long they had before the ship began its long, vertical journey to its final resting place. The water had risen halfway up the side of the struggling diesel engine, so they had to shut it down, which meant that the ship was slowing down and would come to a halt in about thirty minutes. Captain Hollander had calculated that at the present rate of flooding, the ocean would take over the vast ship in just two hours. They were sunk and there was nothing he could do about it. He slammed both fists on the table, causing all the navigation tools to leap onto the floor.

“Ah ... excuse me,” Oli quietly interjected, with one hand in the air as though he were asking to be excused from bible class. Captain Hollander spun round in shock to be greeted by the unlikely sight of five motley-looking youngsters.

“What in the name ... who the hell are ... how did you get ... are you from that damned ship that rammed me? Get off my bridge!” he bellowed.

“We’re here to help,” said Oli, taking one tentative step towards the irate captain. “We came here in our ship, which you can see on the deck if you just look out of the bridge window, and we have some pretty wicked toys that can fix your boat.”

“Ship!” barked the captain.

Ordinarily, if someone was presented at their greatest moment of peril with such utter bunkum, they would probably react somewhat rashly. But there was something about

this scruffy lad that stopped Captain Hollander in mid-rage. Without taking his eyes off the five intruders, he took a few steps backwards to the outward slanting windows and quickly glanced at the deck then back to the crew. Oli nodded his head and pointed down to the left of the ship. He never could remember whether port was left or right. What was it? There's no red port left on the captain's table?

Sara nudged Julie and pointed at Oli, who was mouthing the words of the saying and moving his finger from left to right. They looked at each other and shared a shake of the head and a little grin. Meanwhile, the captain was glancing down at the deck to see the sleek black shape of the ship.

"Port is left," declared Oli, to the only man on the bridge who was probably already aware of that fact. Ignoring the prize of knowledge that had just been gifted to him, the captain slowly walked towards Oli jabbing a finger in his direction.

"So, you came here in that," he said, pointing to the window, "and you think that you can fix a hundred-metre gash in the side of my ship."

"Hundred and twenty actually, so we'd better get started. Where's the engine room Captain?" Oli turned and offered a hand to beckon the captain off the bridge. The girls were stood either side of the door with the molecular welders slung over their shoulders. The captain thought about it for a second or two. This day had gone from catastrophic to utterly inexplicable in the space of a few minutes. What did he have to lose though; there was definitely some kind of alien ship on the deck of the tanker and these kids had just arrived with some odd-looking machinery. His career was going to end in disgrace and he would probably take the decent, seaman-like action and go down with his ship.

"This way," he said, pushing through the exit and double-stepping it down the stairs.

In a few minutes, they were on the top level of the engine room looking down over the semi-submerged diesel engine. The only noise was emanating from the pumps, which were positioned high enough to still be above water. Yannis was tending the machines, trying to coax every last revolution out of them. He knew that he couldn't stop the ship from sinking but if he could keep her afloat till the relief tanker arrived, at least they might get a chance to remove some of the oil.

Robbie had briefed Oli on the plan as they made their way down to the engine room. He told the captain to take Sara and Ed to one end of the crack and Yannis would take him and Julie to the other end. They would then work towards each other, sealing the damage as they went. Yannis had no idea what was going on, but Captain Hollander had never let him down in twenty years of serving together so he followed the captain's instructions.

Oli, Julie and Yannis reached the far end of the crack but it was quite a stretch to reach up to the damaged area from the walkway. Robbie had instructed Oli that they needed to hold the end of the welder about half a metre from the crack for it to work properly. They both tried but couldn't get close enough. Yannis was only the same height as Oli, but it was obvious from his Popeye arms and neck that appeared to seamlessly connect his shoulders to his head that he was probably as strong as a Greek engineer.

"Would you mind having Julie on your shoulders," asked Oli. "She's very light and I think you could manage better ..."

Yannis was already down on one knee, facing away from Julie. Oli took the welder from her and gave her a helping hand onto the chunky Greek's shoulders. He slowly stood up as though there was nothing more than a flimsy scarf draped around his neck. Oli handed the gun back to Julie and the Julie/Yannis combo moved into position. Julie was no stranger to balancing on the shoulders of people whom she'd never met. Being of a somewhat diminutive stature, when she found herself at a concert or festival she would always latch on

to a strong tall chap, who was usually more than willing to accommodate her legs around his neck.

When she pulled the trigger, the machine began to hum and a circular section of the hull about twenty centimetres in diameter shimmered like a distant heat source. She moved the welder slowly to the left and a new section melted at the molecular level. A force field at the point of contact with the hull prevented the water from rushing in and the piece of hull that she had passed over became solid, without even a hint of the crack. Yannis pushed his head forward looking for traces of the damage but the hull plate was faultless. Julie quickly discovered that she could sweep the welder across a metre of hull in the time that it would take to do a brush stroke, then Yannis, who was open-mouthed in disbelief, could shuffle along to the next metre-long section of hull. Oli kept his hands up against Julie's back to prevent her from falling but she was perched on a platform that was as solid as the ship itself. The others were having a much easier job as the crack started at floor level. Captain Hollander could not believe his eyes, but he wasn't going to question it; they were fixing his ship and that was all he needed to know.

The ship lifted off the deck and plunged into the sea alongside the tanker, making no more of a splash than an Olympic diving champion. From there, they could see the full extent of the damage to the outer hull.

"Wow!" exclaimed Jay, examining the cavernous opening in the side of the hull. With the outside lights shining at the damaged area, Robbie could have flown the ship right inside the opening, which stretched into the murky distance.

"We cannot weld that," explained Robbie. "The two pieces need to be within a few centimetres of each other for that to work. We're going to have to spray a sheet of polymer canvas across the hole."

"When you say we, I take it that you mean me," said Jay, suddenly realising the extent of Robbie's 'special' job. He was nervously pinching his brow between his thumb and forefinger.

"Well if you don't mind Jay, all you have to do is walk along the hull spraying a web of canvas across the hole. It will mesh together, solidify and provide an unbreakable barrier between the sections of steel. The Annenians used it to construct domed tents when it rained at other-world parties. It's very clever stuff, completely unbreakable and ... bio-degradable. I can programme it to disintegrate the moment it touches air, so when they put the ship into dry dock and let the water out, it will disappear without a trace."

"So, I'm going to walk down the side of the hull, under water?"

"With your Go-ring of course," interjected Robbie, with the most positively encouraging voice he could muster.

"With my Go-ring on, looking down at ... I have no idea how many thousands of metres of water?"

"Four thousand three hund ..." Robbie's newly-learnt bedside manner kicked in, just a little too late. "Yes, that's about the size of it. Come on, it'll be fun."

"Obviously Robbie, we have somewhat different definitions of fun, but I guess I'll never hear the end of it if I refuse, so let's get it over and done with."

Jay went to the hangar bay. The door was open, and the gangway extended to the ship's hull. Robbie had landed on the side of the ship and although they were upended, pointing at the bottom of the ocean, the ship's gravity kept everything the right way up. A wall of rippling water was held back by a force field. A flap opened in the wall of the hangar and what appeared to be a super-soaker water gun with a tank on top appeared.

“It’s full of compressed polymer canvas Jay. More than enough to cover the hole. Just walk down the edge of the opening, spraying even lines across the gap. The polymer will do the rest.”

Jay tapped his arm on the wall to ensure that his Go-ring was engaged. He felt nothing so assumed that it was. He picked up the toy gun and headed for the wall of dark, forbidding ocean that was hanging uninvitingly at the entrance to the hangar.

Oli looked to his left and could see Ed and Sara working their way towards him. By his reckoning, they had about thirty metres of damage remaining. He also noticed that as they sealed more and more of the crack, the pressure of the water outside being pushed through an ever-decreasing gap was causing the ocean to enter the engine room in a more horizontal manner. Instead of merely running down the inner hull of the ship to pool on the flooded floor, it was now jetting across the cavernous room in a curtain of water.

“This looks cool,” said Oli, stooping to look underneath the perfectly flat plane of water then raising his head to look along the top of the strange effect. He moved under the sheet of water and poked his finger into the fast-moving jet. It nearly pulled his finger out of its socket and sprayed him with freezing cold water, which fortunately, the Go-ring dispersed. Julie had climbed down from Yannis’ shoulders as the crack came within reach of the gantry.

“Oh wow!” she exclaimed, crouching to look along the sheet of water, “you could wait a lifetime and not see anything as perfect as that.” She lifted the welder to point at the next piece of hull. “Anyway Oli, work to be done.”

Yannis stepped back to the edge of the walkway just as Julie pressed the trigger. The slight change of angle at the edge of the crack caused the curtain of water to change its trajectory. Instead of clearing Yannis’ head, it suddenly fired straight into his barrel chest. Even Yannis’ stocky build couldn’t compete with a force similar to that produced by a water cannon condensed into a two-centimetre line across his torso. He flew off his feet and was slammed backwards into the guard rail surrounding the walkway. The inertia of his weight and the continuing onslaught against his chest pushed his top half over the rail, followed by his flailing legs. Yannis had spent enough time in the engine room to know every section, every walkway and every danger presented by the harsh environment in a ship’s engineering and as he helplessly pirouetted over the top of the rail, he knew full well that the next stop, following an eight-metre plummet, would almost certainly be a backbreaking crunch on the steel casing of one of the giant generators that provided electrical power to the ship.

Jay faced the wall of ocean with a certain amount of trepidation. He poked the barrel of the polymer gun into the iridescent wall and it disappeared without any resistance. Next, he pushed his arm into the water and felt no sensation of wetness or cold on his skin. He built up the courage, took a deep breath and stuck his head through. There in front of him was the horizontal hull of the great ship disappearing into the murky distance with the jagged gash looking like a rocky canyon.

“Wow!” he gasped, then frantically breathed in and out expecting his lungs to fill with water, even though he’d been told just to breathe normally. He flew backwards into the cargo bay, slipping on the water that he brought back in with him and landed flat on his backside.

“That’s the spirit,” said Robbie, trying to fill every syllable with reassurance, whilst really thinking; what a nob. He could quite easily have sent the drone out to complete the task, but Jay needed to get to grips with the technology and overcome his fears. If the ship really started to go down, the drone could seal the hole in a couple of minutes.

“Off you go now ... just walk out there like you’re walking to the pub.”

Jay picked himself up, headed for the ramp and marched straight out into the ocean, still holding his breath for a few seconds before tentatively sucking in short mouthfuls of air.

“Now this is weird,” he said, taking in the view. It was obvious where up should have been. The light of the sun was flooding around the hull of the ship to his left and the darkness of the ocean was to his right. Straight in front of him was the hull, which should have been angled ninety degrees round to the right. “Very weird,” he reiterated.

He walked down the ramp and over to the start of the gaping hole. He decided to work along the bottom edge of the damage so that he would be facing the daylight, because every time he looked the other way he felt a gurgling in his stomach at the thought of what might be lurking in the featureless depths. With the gun held out in front of him, he pressed the trigger and a stream of blue liquid shot out at high speed and impacted the steel hull. He was quite taken aback by the power of the jet and let go of the trigger. In the space of a couple of seconds, the blob of blue liquid expanded to 100 times its size, shimmered and transformed into a dark silver colour. He kicked it and it was as hard as the hull of the ship. It was actually seventy times harder than the steel plates that made up the hull and weighed as much as an orange, but there was no way for him to have known that. He aimed the gun at the edge of the blob, which had expanded over the edge of the hole and pulled the trigger again. This time he moved the aim of the gun across the hole and back again then let go to see the effect. The trail of blue liquid turned out to be more akin to string and traversed the gap to stick to the other side and then back again. It then expanded so fast that Jay felt the shock wave through the water. The two strings joined together and completely covered a metre-long section of the hole. Overjoyed with the simplicity of the operation, Jay, completely oblivious to the seven-metre long killer whale hovering vertically above his head, continued with his task.

Oli had seen the jet of water change course and witnessed Yannis’ ungainly exit from the walkway. He didn’t even have time to think about what he was planning to do, he just leapt across the three-metre wide steel platform and made a grab for any part of the floundering Greek that he could reach, which happened to be his left ankle. There was no way on Earth or any other of the trillions of planets in the galaxy, that he would be able to pick up the stocky engineer if he was using both hands with Yannis standing still, let alone with one outstretched arm whilst the engineer was spinning through the air. But none of these thoughts had deterred him from his heroic dive. Oli wrapped his hand around Yannis’ ankle, just above his boot. His hand wouldn’t even cover three-quarters of the girth of the ankle, but he gripped with all his might. He felt a slight tug in his arm as he took the weight followed by nothing. Sara had stopped welding and turned around to see the cause of the commotion.

“What the ...?” She almost dropped the welder in amazement at the sight of Oli with his arm outstretched over the edge of the railing with Yannis dangling by one leg at the end of Oli’s extended limb. Oli didn’t appear to even be straining with the effort; he just turned his hand so that he could see Yannis’ face and with a look on both of their faces as though they’d seen a brass band of mermaids playing Roll Out The Barrel, he lifted Yannis up, placed his other hand on his chest and swung him over the rail onto his feet.

“Thanks,” said Yannis, a blank look of utter confusion on his face.

“No problem,” replied Oli, with a similar air of bewilderment.

They both moved behind Sara to avoid the curtain of water as she continued with the welding. They had barely ten metres to go now.

Outside, Jay was well into his stride covering the gaping hole with polymer canvas. He’d relaxed into the idea of being the wrong way up hanging over several

kilometres of ocean. He'd gone about halfway along the one hundred and twenty-metre hole when a booming voice echoed all around him.

"Hey Madge, come and have a look at this odd-looking Haman."

Jay arched his neck backwards to determine the origin of this massive voice and was confronted by the enormous teeth of a killer whale just a few metres above him. Another slightly smaller whale was just joining the big one at the same vertical angle.

Oh, no ... hold on a minute, he thought, as his legs buckled from under him and he collapsed to the hull, they're swimming normally, I'm the wrong way up and who said that?

"I did," boomed the voice, "and how can you understand Whale." The whale turned its massive head to face the other one and said, "This Haman understands Whale and it's telepathic."

"I am?" asked Jay, but he heard his voice come out as whale song.

"It's the Go-ring," explained Robbie, his voice appearing from nowhere in particular. "It translates on demand. The whales are telepathic and can hear your thoughts translated into Whale. Say hello; they won't hurt you."

"But they're Killer whales," blurted Jay, "as in; they kill things." Jay was desperately trying to extricate from his mind, the image of these black and white monsters biting a two hundred and fifty-kilo seal in half.

"Killer? him?" sniggered the smaller whale, "he couldn't hurt a sprat."

"Only when we're hungry," bellowed the whale, ignoring the jibe from his smaller counterpart, "and to be perfectly honest, you wouldn't even suffice as an hors d'oeuvre."

Jay thought about this for a while and felt safer in the knowledge that even if the whale did try to eat him, it would probably break its teeth on the Go-ring.

"Hello," said Jay. "Who's Madge?"

"The wife," said the whale with a flick of his head towards the other whale.

"I'm Burt."

"Well my name is Jay and I must say it's a pleasure to meet you."

"What are you doing with this Haman craft? I hope it's not going to sink and spread its filthy black death into the sea; is it?"

"I'm just fixing the hole," said Jay, waving the polymer canvas gun in front of the whale's eye.

"How can you breathe under water?" asked Madge.

"Long story," said Jay "which I'd be more than happy to tell you, but I really think I'd better get on with this job before it does sink."

"Absolutely," said Burt, pushing Madge away with his huge pectoral fin.

"Women!" he exclaimed, "Always with the questions. Carry on young fellow. Don't mind if we watch, do you?"

"Not at all," said Jay, turning to begin a new line of spray.

"Now that's impressive," bellowed Burt, as the first section of string expanded into a solid shell. "Would I be correct in my assumption that what we're witnessing here is not entirely Haman in origin?"

"Not entirely," answered Jay, slightly confused as to how a whale would know the difference. "But don't you mean human?" asked Jay, continuing with the spraying.

"Not according to the original Annenian I don't, no."

Jay spun round, firing a trail of polymer canvas down the side of the hull.

"You know the Annenians?" he barked, the whale translation of his words vibrating the steel plate on which he stood.

“Not personally,” said Burt, with an unmistakable air of stupid boy in his voice. “I’m old but I’m not that old. We were rather hoping that they would return at some point and stop their naughty little creation from trying to wipe us out. Thankfully, apart from a few ignorant bladder-sacks, you managed to curtail that particular hobby just before you started filling the sea with Black Death.”

Jay thought about how he, as the first person to speak to a whale, could possibly make up for the hundreds of years of maltreatment that the whales had suffered. He wasn’t really a great ambassador though. He’d once decided to give Sara, who cared with every fibre of her being about wildlife and the planet, a special gift for her birthday. So, he bought a tin of tuna steaks and took great care and not an inconsiderable amount of time, constructing a new label for the tin. The label had a picture of a dolphin on it with the words Tuna Friendly Dolphin Steak written in bright red letters. It had taken a few days for the lump on his head caused by the flying tin to subside. Fortunately, Burt continued to talk thus covering what could have been an uncomfortable silence.

“Where are they? Are they back?” Burt sounded excited at the prospect.

“I’m really sorry,” said Jay, “both for the behaviour of humans and for the fact that I have to tell you that the Annenians are all dead, wiped out by a horrible disease thousands of years ago.”

Jay continued to repair the hole whilst relaying the tale of the Annenians’ demise to the two whales. They floated in silence by his side, Burt comforting Madge with his fin. Tales of the Annenians had been passed down by the whales from generation to generation. The whales had hoped that they would return and knock the Hamans into shape. They made such a mess of everything. If they weren’t killing whales by the thousand, they were fighting amongst themselves, building bigger and louder machines to carve through the precious oceans. Every time one of these monsters sank, it vomited its poison into the sea and killed their food. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, their ham-fisted techniques for extracting the Black Death from the ocean floor often failed and destroyed even more of the whale’s precious habitat. And now the Annenians were never coming back, so the Hamans would continue bickering and polluting till nothing was left.

Jay told Burt and Madge about the spaceships and Annenian technology and their plan to use it for good. He explained, to the total agreement of the whales, that humans were not ready for such potentially destructive power. But he did point out that there were many good humans who had formed organisations that fought for the whale’s rights and indeed the rights of the entire planet. Burt and Madge surfaced for a gulp of air and Jay continued with the final ten metres of damaged hull.

Julie lowered her welding gun, allowing Sara the honour of finishing the final section of repair. As the last powerful jet of water shot across the engine room to impact on the side of the half-submerged diesel engine, everyone cheered. Captain Hollander offered his hand to Oli.

“I have no idea where you came from or how you just did that, but may I offer you my deepest thanks. You have averted a major tragedy.”

Oli took his hand and put every effort into matching the old sea dog’s vice-like grip. The captain suddenly yelped, pulled his hand away and shook it to get the blood flowing again.

“Oops! I’m so sorry,” said Oli, tapping the Go-ring to turn it off and offering his hand once more. The captain held up both hands in front of his body and suggested that they just accept his thanks and forego any physical displays of gratitude.

“What do you plan to do about the outer hull?” asked the captain. “A hole that size will seriously weaken the structural integrity of the ship.”

“All done,” shouted Jay, as everyone turned to see him bounding along the walkway with a spring in his step that was unlike any version of Jay that they’d ever seen. But whilst the eyes of Oli’s crew were fixed on the unusual sight of an ebullient Jay, Captain Hollander and Yannis were giving their full attention to the leggy red-head, gliding down the steps behind him.

“Captain,” she said, in her soft Irish inflection, “If you run your pumps at full power for fifteen hours and twenty-two minutes, you will be able to restart the engine and continue with your journey.”

Oli put his head in his hands and muttered something in Oli’ish as Ed joined the captain and Yannis with their drooling. Even though he knew that she was a construction of the nano-drones contrived from the imagination of Oli, it didn’t seem to matter whenever Roberta walked into the room.

“But you must place the ship in dry dock for repairs as soon as you unload the cargo ... OK?”

“OK,” said the captain following a long pause.

“Right then,” said Oli, rubbing his hands together like someone who’d just completed an excellent job of cleaning their car. “We’ll be off.”

They headed back to the deck of the ship, boarded the little black craft and waved to everyone on the bridge. The gangway closed behind them and in a split second they were gone, leaving Captain Hollander and Yannis confused but nonetheless, overjoyed.

BURT’N’MADGE

“How in the name of all that’s believable did I manage to hold up that Greek guy with one hand?” asked Oli, as they headed underwater towards the coast of Cornwall.

“Well, either you’ve been secretly working out to a level where you’ve achieved super human strength,” said Robbie.

“Unlikely,” whispered Ed to Julie.

“Or the Go-ring,” continued Robbie, “sensed an overload in the muscles in your body and compensated with a neural-linked expansion field, thus increasing your rather feeble human strength sufficiently to allow the completion of your desired task.”

“Can it do that?” asked Sara.

“Can it do what?” asked Ed.

“What Robbie just said,” said Oli.

“Yes, of course it can,” stated Robbie rather matter-of-factly. “The ring is designed to protect the wearer from any damage which may transpire due to either external or internal forces. If you attempt to perform a task that stresses the body to breaking point, then the ring will interject and compensate for any shortfall.”

“You could have told us,” Oli said, shaking his head and grinning at the others as the cliff below the house appeared out of the murky Cornish sea.

“I just did,” Robbie replied, as the ship moved into the dissolving cliff face. There followed a few minute’s silence as the craft matter-transformed the rock and moved up into the smuggler’s cave. They settled onto the hard rock of the cave floor and headed up the passageway to the house. Julie was first in the kitchen and had already put the kettle on for a nice hot cup of tea.

“Tea!” snarled Ed. “I think the completion of our first successful mission calls for something a little more appealing than tea.”

“Good point,” said Julie, lifting the whistling kettle from the Aga and placing it on the steel hot plate. “Hey Robbie, why don’t you come to the pub with us?” she said, looking towards the cellar.

Robbie had already wired the house with atom-sized communication probes. Well nearly all the house. He'd found Sara standing outside the bathroom, shaking her head in a most emphatic manner whilst the drone was administering the devices upstairs and had decided against bugging that room. So apart from the smallest room, he could see and hear everything that went on in the entire house.

"Love to," came his voice from somewhere in the corner of the room. "I'll just change into something more appropriate."

They all looked at each other with mutual concern. Oli was first to relay the consensus. "I think maybe that Roberta would be a little spicy for The Sailor's Arms Robbie, why don't you try something new?"

Following a surprisingly short wait prompting Ed to suggest that the girls could learn a thing or two from Robbie, they heard super-dense footsteps climbing the stairs from the basement. They waited with bated breath as the door to the kitchen swung open and there in all his glory was old Rob the Cornish fisherman, complete with yellow waterproof dungarees, sou' wester and boat hook. Old Rob stood in the doorway wondering why everyone was falling around, guffawing with laughter and banging their hands on the kitchen table. This was not entirely the response that he was aiming for.

"No?" asked Robbie.

It took a while before anyone was in any fit state to say anything and the more he stood there, motionless with that confused look on his face, stroking his bushy grey beard, the more incapable they became to offer any advice whatsoever.

"Apart ... from," began Oli, before he collapsed into fits again.

"Apart from the fact ...," he began again, composing himself with deep breaths, "that I'm sure the guys in The Sailors know every old sea dog from here to Land's End, I thought that the idea was for us to go about unnoticed. If we walk into a pub with you looking like that, I can guarantee that we'll be the only thing that they're looking at."

The drone morphed into its blank form, seemed to think for a few seconds and then the feet turned into a pair of small but chunky boots that were loose fitting and slightly scuffed. Next, the legs formed, which much to the delight of Oli and Ed, obviously belonged to a girl. The board shorts began just above the knee and the whole ensemble was topped off with a red and white chequered shirt. She had a normal face when compared with the stunning beauty of Roberta, although as Ed was prompt to point out, it wasn't the sort of face that you'd climb over to reach Oli. She had light brown hair and only Robbie knew that she was perfectly designed to be slightly less attractive to boys than Julie and Sara, who both nodded approval immediately.

"Brilliant!" said Oli both thumbs in the air. "A girl surfer which means we can still call you Robbie. Just one small point though," Oli was shaking his head and grinning, "lose the surfboard. We're going to the pub."

They all sniggered as the surfboard floated away from her, dissolved into a cloud of nano-drones and headed back to the ship to carry on tunnelling out the cliff.

They walked down the hill to The Sailors, laughing and joking all the way. It was one of those perfect Cornish spring days that you must enjoy to the full, safe in the knowledge that the weather could, and probably would, change at any moment. Even though the sun was shining high in the cloudless sky, there was still a chill in the air conveyed from the cold Atlantic Ocean on a light westerly breeze, so rather than enduring the beer garden, they opted for their favourite table in the corner of the pub, next to the three-hundred-year-old fireplace. The rickety old round wooden table offered them the most sociable seating arrangement and they were slightly shielded from the bar by a waist-height partition fashioned from what were almost certainly beams from some ship wreck that had occurred two or three hundred years ago. If wood could talk, then the frame of this old pub could

certainly entertain its customers with fine yarns of seafaring deeds. The usual trappings of nautical history hung around the walls. There were ancient black and white photographs of ship wrecks and paintings of brave lifeboat men rowing out through thunderous seas. Glass-fronted cases containing knots and shackles adorned one wall, but pride of place was given to the figurehead of a mermaid with long flowing blonde hair that protruded from the wall above the fireplace, and disappeared into the open rafters of the roof. She came from an eighteenth-century pirate ship that had been sunk by the British navy as they tried to land their cargo of stolen gold and silver.

The same two old bearded men that were there when the crew had left to rescue the Kapetan Georgos were propping up the bar talking to Harry, the landlord of the pub.

“So Jay, what were you doing outside while we were all inside the ship?” asked Julie.

Jay relayed the feeling of stepping out into the ocean and using the polymer canvas gun to repair the hole. “Oh, and a couple of killer whales called Burt and Madge came over for a chat,” he nonchalantly threw into the mix. “And then I ...”

“Hold on,” said Julie, shaking a hand to halt Jay’s discourse, “go back to the whales. They did what?”

“Oh ... ah ... a couple of whales called Burt and Madge ... they’re married I think, came over and had a chat with me. The ring translated what they were saying, and I could talk back to them. Cool huh? Oh, and they’re telepathic so they could understand what I was thinking.”

“Poor whales,” interjected Ed.

“What did they have to say?” asked Sara, casting a sideways scowl towards Ed.

“Well, they were obviously quite irate about all the hunting and the crap that we humans are pumping into their ocean. They know about the Annenians and were hoping that they’d come back some time.”

“What did you tell them?” asked Julie.

“I told them the truth. They were really upset. I think the Annenians and whales hit it off while they were here. They also told me that there’s something wrong with the Earth’s magnetic field. They use it for navigation and that’s why quite a few of them have ended up stranded in estuaries and shallow coves recently. I told them that we’d investigate and report back. Robbie gave me a tracker and communication device to put on Burt’s dorsal fin so that we can get in touch with them when we have any answers.”

Suddenly distracted by a noise from the bar, they all looked around to see Harry slapping the side of the television which had been showing an aerial view of the Kapetan Georgos, underway once more and heading for the Anacortes Refinery in Washington. The screen was crackling and buzzing, and the picture was becoming nondescript, something that in years gone by was quite a common occurrence with old valve televisions and rickety aerials attached to the chimney pots of houses, but in the digital age it had become rare indeed to see someone slapping the side of a television. In fact, they no longer had sides to slap.

“Haven’t paid your bill again,” joked one of the old men, as Harry tried to locate the optimum point at which to beat the living daylight out of his flat-screen television. Then the picture settled down and the crew heard the newscaster say that the damage to the ship hadn’t been as bad as previously suspected, so the ship was out of danger and heading for the US where it would be unloaded and then placed in dry dock for repairs.

“Nice cover up,” said Oli, taking a sip from his pint of Proper Job beer.

“So, is there a problem with the magnetic field?” asked Jay, turning to Robbie, who was taking a sip of beer and analysing its content.

“There’s a slightly elevated level of solar activity that always affects the Earth’s magnetic field, but this usually subsides without any long-term effects.”

Robbie told them that he would keep an eye on it and they continued with their debriefing session long into the evening, by which time the conversation had moved well away from the world of rescue and into the usual domain of drivel.

It was ten in the morning in Maryland, USA and Professor Jiaying Wong was arriving for work at the Stereo Science Centre, part of NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Centre. She had always been fascinated by the sun, ever since her father Jianyu, a first-generation Chinese immigrant, had pointed a telescope at the sun and, using a piece of paper on which he reflected the image, had revealed several sun spots. She’d studied for her degree in Astral Physics at Cambridge University and went on to complete her PhD with NASA at the very establishment at which she now held the post of Chief Mission Specialist.

Stereo comprised two satellites that were launched in October 2006 to monitor the sun’s activity. One satellite orbited ahead of the Earth and the other behind, so that both sides of the sun could be monitored simultaneously. This was the dream job for Jiaying. She was paid a not-insubstantial amount of money to spend all day experimenting on her favourite subject.

On entering the usually calm environment of her office, she noticed a slightly raised level of activity than was usual. She placed her briefcase on her desk and headed into the main control room.

“What’s all the excitement?” she asked Nick, her assistant.

“Oh, morning Professor Wong,” he said, briefly taking his eyes off the screen to acknowledge her. “We’ve had some unusual solar activity this morning.” He rapidly typed several commands into the keyboard and the screen changed to an image of the sun from 08:30 that morning. Jiaying was always a bit blown away by the speed at which Nick operated the equipment. She was a genius in her field but her knowledge of the way that all the toys worked was dwarfed by that of her uber-geek assistant. If there was a dictionary that described objects in a visual format, next to the word Geek there would be a picture of Nick. It wasn’t just the prescription, round spectacles or the unruly waves of hair pushed indifferently to one side of his head, nor did the poorly-fitting clothes and partly-shaven face really clinch the deal. Nick had this look in his eyes that revealed the level of thought that was occurring every minute of every day in that oversized brain of his. Such trivialities as personal appearance or bodily maintenance were way too far down the intellectual scale for him to allocate them even a single neuron. Fortunately, he still lived with his mother, so she took charge of the menial tasks, such as keeping him alive.

Next to Nick, Jiaying Wong was a picture of symmetry and order. Her clothes were an elegant mix of modern western business and traditional Chinese cheongsam, perfectly orchestrated around her small but aesthetically-proportional frame. Unlike most scientists, Jiaying believed that personal appearance was of equal importance to intellectual prowess. She brushed a few rogue hairs away from Nick’s face as he tapped away on his keyboard bringing a new image onto the screen. The image showed five sunspots gathered together in an unusually tight grouping with several coronal loops arcing out into space and back again.

“Have there been any Mass Ejections yet?” asked Jiaying.

“Not yet, but with this much activity I would expect one any time soon,” said Nick, playing the keyboard like a virtuoso pianist to display a sequence of pictures cycling through twenty-minute intervals.

“As you can see,” said Nick, “the activity is directed away from Earth, so there’s no immediate need to put out any warnings. We can keep an eye on it over the next couple of weeks as it rotates.”

“Good work Nick. Send a copy of the magnetic readings to my desktop,” said Jiaying, patting Nick on the shoulder and walking to her office.

She sat at her desk and turned the picture of her father to face her. He hadn’t lived to see her reach the very top in her field, but he died happy just three years prior, safe in the knowledge that she was well on her way. She gave a little smile to acknowledge the pride that he would have surely felt for his brilliant daughter.

“I think that’s enough beer for one evening,” slurred Oli, as Robbie finished her eighteenth pint. Someone was going to notice the diminutive surf girl who could put away nearly ten litres of strong ale. They would probably enter her into some local drinking contest, which of course she would win. Low profile, he kept repeating to himself, low profile.

The pub was full of locals now and they felt safely lost in the crowd, but as they all stood to leave, Oli gasped in horror at Robbie.

“Sit down,” he shouted, and everyone in the pub turned to look at them. They sat in silence for a few seconds, hands clasped in their laps not daring to make eye contact with each other. Then as the flamboyant chatter once again crept back to its previous level, Oli, without moving anything but his index finger, pointed through the top of the table to where Robbie’s legs would be. Everyone slowly lent back in their chairs and studied the object of Oli’s apprehension, not wanting to attract any further attention with sudden movements, and a gradual intake of air rippled around the table. Above the table, Robbie was plain looking surf girl, but below she was extremely, non-plain-looking Minotaur, complete with cloven hooves, wiry hair and huge muscles that were threatening to upend the table. Robbie was looking at the incongruous juxtaposition of two forms with a certain amount of bewilderment.

“No idea,” she said, glancing around the table at the equally bewildered faces, “but I don’t seem to be able to do anything about it.”

“Well you can’t leave the pub like that,” said Sara, staring in disgust at the vision before her, “I mean ... those shoes and that top?”

Everyone glared at Sara as if to say, Is that really the main problem with this situation?

“What?” she asked, unequivocally convinced with her designer’s eye that it was the main problem.

“We’ll have to surround you as we walk out the door,” suggested Oli. “Hopefully everyone’s too engrossed in their chatter to notice.”

Robbie sidled around the table keeping her legs out of view whilst everyone else gathered in a semicircle around the end of the seating area. Fortunately, the noise in the pub had once again reached alcohol-fuelled reverie volume so the noise that Robbie was making as she forced her huge hooves around the table legs went unnoticed. Oli checked over his shoulder to make sure that no one was watching and gave a short nod of the head to Robbie, who stood up and was immediately surrounded by the crew. Or at least her lower half was, because the size of her Minotaur legs placed her head a good shoulder height above the others. However, it wasn’t the head that they were concerned with. They moved as one towards the door, which Sara then opened, and Robbie slipped unseen from the pub.

“Put this around your waste,” said Julie, removing her jacket and handing it to Robbie. They kept in tight formation as they swaggered through the village, Robbie’s hooves clippetty-clopping along the road. Oli noticed that Robbie was also swaying slightly, and it

couldn't be due to the unusual undercarriage that she was sporting because those newly-formed legs could have supported a railway locomotive.

"No more Proper Job for you then," he whispered, nudging Ed in the arm and pointing out Robbie's unsteady course. Ed uttered a quick snort of agreement as he swayed homeward.

Back at the house they headed straight for the cellar to work out what was wrong with Robbie. As they reached the basement, Oli grabbed everyone's arm except Sara's and beckoned for them to hold back. Sara reached the door and looked round to see everyone waiting expectantly at the foot of the stairs.

"Very funny," she said, and turned to face the door. "Oo-argh!" she said and didn't even bother to turn around to greet the rather childish laughter. "Oooo-argh," she said again, loud enough to drown out the growing level of hilarity from behind. No matter how many hours Sara had spent in front of her mirror, practicing the vocal code, she always sounded like a country yokel rather than a pirate.

"Ahargh!" shouted Oli with a shake of his fist, not really wanting to endure Sara's suffering any more. There was a click and the door silently slid open.

Once inside the ship, the drone discovered that it could change at will into any form. It went through an array of forms from Roberta to Robbie, to Albert Einstein and then finally a bearded man with a long flowing robe. No sooner had the man in the robe appeared before the drone dissipated into its millions of nano-drone parts and scattered about the ship.

"Who was that?" asked Oli, in his best version of a suspicious voice.

"Who was what?" asked Robbie, obviously to all present trying desperately to brush over the subject.

"That foreign looking man in the robe. The one with the beard. The one that looked very much like a wandering holy man." Oli was aware that he was starting to sound like an irate teacher, quizzing the class as to the origins of the paper dart that had just landed on his desk.

"No idea," said Robbie. "It must have been some random person in the memory banks. I've told you, I've sent the drone out into the world on many occasions throughout Earth history. You cannot expect me to remember every single transmutation."

Oli was fully aware that Robbie could remember every single electronic conversation that had ever occurred, and he could probably recount every minute of every day for the last fifteen thousand years.

Oli figured he'd let it go. He hated to hear his artificial friend squirm. But it wasn't the end of the matter by a long shot. Robbie asked the crew to make their way to the control room, where he had something to show them.

As they sat in their seats the screen lit up with a view of the sun. It looks as though our whale friends were on to something. I've asked them to join us." Without warning two holographic whales appeared above the control panel. they were about a metre long and both waved a pectoral fin at the crew.

"There's been some rather a-typical activity on the sun. Do you see those sunspots? well they're unusually close together. Now sunspots are areas of increased magnetic activity. They appear as black dots because they're cooler than the surrounding photosphere, although still radiating a temperature of two thousand five hundred degrees Celsius. The arcs of light that you see are called ..."

Robbie had become aware that the crew were staring open-mouthed at Burt and Madge and paying no attention whatsoever to his lecture. He suddenly remembered that they'd been in the pub since mid-afternoon. If he'd had any, he would have raised his eyebrows and tutted. Thanks to the eighteen pints of Proper Job that the drone had absorbed and analysed, Robbie had discovered a pin-point band of Gamma radiation that would

penetrate the body and eradicate all traces of ethanol in the blood's neurotransmitter and neuropeptide systems. He fired a micro-second long burst into the control room and everyone immediately sat up in their seats and gave each other a confused look.

"Right," continued Robbie, "shall I start again?"

"Well, that was a waste of money," said Oli. "I don't have even the faintest desire to rush out and get a kebab."

Robbie recounted the previous synopsis and then continued.

"I've analysed the magnetic activity from deep within the sun and it's likely that a solar flare will erupt in two hours and fifty-three minutes."

"A what?" asked Ed.

"Don't you know anything?" sniggered Julie. "A solar flare or Coronal Mass Ejection is a burst of solar wind and plasma that's fired into space at close to the speed of light."

The room went silent and everyone looked to Robbie for confirmation.

"Well basically, yes," said Robbie, sounding as shocked as everyone else in the room. "Two opposite poles of magnetism are brought together and cause a massive explosion which hurls billions of tonnes of charged particles out into space. This creates the solar wind, which can affect electronics on Earth. Fortunately, the Earth has a strong magnetic field of its own and this deflects the particles harmlessly around the atmosphere. As some of the wind funnels down through the Polar Regions, the particles collide with gas particles in the atmosphere and create the Aurora Borealis. It usually takes several days for the wind to reach the Earth, but the whales can detect the changes in magnetism from the sun long before the charged particles begin to interact with the magnetic field of the Earth. Quite remarkable really."

"It may be remarkable," boomed Burt, startling everyone into sitting upright, "but at this present moment in time I would change my whale brain for one of your funny little human ones just so that I didn't have to listen to the cacophony of noise. I can't sleep, I can't concentrate on reading and, I daren't go anywhere near the coast in case I end up beaching. It's driving me potty."

"I never thought I'd hear a whale use the word potty," said Oli.

Burt and Madge said their farewells and the two holographic whales disappeared. Robbie suggested that they all get a good night's sleep and then tomorrow they could fly up to the sun and take a closer look to see what was causing the sunspots, but he realised that he was too late. They were all sound asleep in their seats. He gently reclined the seats, dimmed the lights and went on the internet to win some more money at backgammon and poker. Well, they had to fund their love of beer somehow.

Grrghracksh saw the strange looking creature running away through the trees. He was too dazed and confused to even consider chasing it and killing it. First things first, and not necessarily in that order, he thought. He was obviously on a planet. He'd certainly escaped the explosion that occurred when he had set his ship to self-destruct in a desperate last-ditch attempt to destroy the Earth creature. But foremost in his self-congratulatory thoughts, was that he was still alive. He hauled his giant body upright in the seat and prodded the control panel. He had to find out where he was but without any stars it would be impossible. The last thing that he remembered was climbing into the escape pod and being thrown out of the ship inside the home star of that ridiculously ugly blue planet. He realised at the time that his chances of survival were virtually zero, but a Throgloid never gives up until his foe is tucking into his shoulder with a flagon of ale to wash it down.

All the computer could tell him was that he was on a small moon which orbited a gas giant. It must be the gas giant that they passed on the way to the ugly creature's

home, he thought. There was no way that he could have travelled further than that in an escape pod. Maybe the blast from his ship had pushed him away from the star and sent him crashing into this moon. He must have blacked out. How long for though? He punched in another command to the controls and the pod informed him that only forty minutes had passed since its ejection from the ship.

This makes no sense, he thought, reaching behind the seat to find his precious Grax, the three-metre-long curved blade that was the Throgloid's preferred method of persuasion. He'd also had the presence of mind to throw one of the captured pulse rifles into the pod and this was lying on the floor by his feet. From what he'd seen so far of the inhabitants of this rock, he figured that he was more than adequately armed. He would go and investigate and then when night came, he would be able to use the navigation controls inside the escape pod to get a fix on the stars and at least work out where he was. Or at least the computer would work it out. He never really took to stellar navigation, he was more of a; kill everything and then find out where you are kind of guy. He threw the Grax and the pulse rifle up onto the ground above the pod and put his arms either side of the cockpit ready to haul his substantial weight to his feet. He pushed with all his might and to his surprise he flew out of the cockpit and landed in a heap next to the pod.

Low gravity, he thought as he dusted himself off and crawled to his feet. He was light, about a quarter of his usual weight. He bent down to pick up the Grax and it was also light. He swung it through the air, sweeping the blade around the back of his head several times in quick succession. He couldn't believe how fast the blade was moving. He was aware of his prowess with a Grax, but this was unbelievable. Even Plerox the Invincible, his old tutor, would have struggled to swing his blade with such dexterity. He brought the weapon down on a metre-wide branch of one of the trees that he'd demolished. He put the usual amount of force into the blow and the branch split in two, sending arm-sized splinters scudding across the forest floor. Oh, he was going to enjoy introducing himself to the locals on this planet. He sheathed the Grax and reached down for the pulse rifle. Better just make sure that's working too, he thought and pointed it at the trunk of one of the pine trees. He turned it to low power and pulled the trigger. The bottom ten metres of the giant tree exploded, showering the forest with huge chunks of wood and the remaining two hundred and ninety metres of tree dropped vertically onto the shattered trunk, firing more wooden missiles across the forest floor in all directions. Grrghracksh, who was just beginning to form his evil grin, had to leap out of the way to avoid being skewered by one of these metre-long darts. He flew fifteen metres through the air and landed face down in the dirt.

"That works," he said, grinning across his massive head just in time to hear the creaking of timber from overhead. The upper part of the tree had balanced itself perfectly on the remains of its trunk, but he'd shot the tree that had sustained the most damage from the entry of the pod. The shock wave that travelled up the trunk as it landed on the base succeeded in snapping the remaining part where it was weakest and Grrghracksh watched in horror as the top one hundred metres of tree surged its way through the canopy and with a slow-motion certainty in which he was unable to intervene, came crashing down towards the pod. He knew from the moment that it began its journey, where it was going to land. Several hundred tons of tree landed square across the middle of the craft and crushed it like a plastic toy, sending pieces of Throgloid machinery skimming across the forest floor.

The Commander dropped his weapons and walked despondently towards the wreck. The tree was lying at an angle across the pod and an array of wires and switches had spilled out of every shattered side, like blood and brains from a head that he'd just stamped on. He let out a bloodcurdling howl as he confirmed that all the navigation instruments that he was going to use to locate his position were smashed beyond repair. As though it was the

tree's fault, he ran back to pick up the pulse rifle and fired several shots along the fallen trunk, obliterating it and the remains of the pod along with it.

He had no food, no way of sending a distress signal, and no way off this stupid planet. He tried to calm his rage. He would have to be smart. Maybe the locals were technologically advanced, and he would be able to use their transmitters to call for help. Maybe they even had a ship that he could steal. But before he began, he really had to eat something. He slung the pulse rifle over his shoulder then headed in the same direction as the small creature. He didn't need to use the steps to negotiate the fallen tree it was a simple jump for him to clear it and land gently on the other side. He could get used to this. Maybe he'd conquer the locals and rule them as their emperor.

Arnus had run as fast as he could back to the house to tell his parents what he'd seen.

"Come on Arnus," said Malrey, his mother, "just because you didn't manage to collect any wood, that doesn't mean that you can go making up silly stories. I know it's the first day of Amphora and I'm sure you got totally side-tracked watching it rise. But we still need wood for the fire." She patted him on the head and told him to go back to the forest. Just then they heard an explosion the like of which they'd never heard before. The windows rattled, and dust floated down from the roof beams. Malrey screamed and grabbed hold of Arnus. His father Tibras came running into the kitchen from the back yard where he'd been preparing some planks of wood for seasoning. "What the hell was that?" he shouted.

There followed a sound that froze the blood in their veins. There were many wild animals living all around them but nothing that possessed such a bloodcurdling howl.

"I told you," said Arnus, pulling himself away from his mother's grip, "There's a huge creature in the forest. He just fell out of the sky in some kind of ship." He reached in his bag for his camera, turned it on and showed his doubting parents the photograph of the pod.

"Come," said Arnus, grabbing his parent's hands, "I'll show you where it landed, and I bet that's where the explosion came from. Maybe the ship blew up and the creature needs help." His mother however was thinking along completely contrasting lines to entering the forest and looking for whatever created the explosion. Her mind was taking her in the opposite direction entirely. They walked onto the veranda just in time to hear several more explosions that shook the entire house. Clouds of black smoke appeared over the tops of the trees, rolling through the air and forcing their way high into the morning sky. A few seconds later Grrghracksh emerged from the forest. Now that he was upright, Arnus could grasp the full size of him. He was massive. Even Arnus was backing away from the notion of trying to make friends with him, especially when he pulled the Grax from the scabbard on his back and ran to the creak in great five-metre bounds to where the hapless water hog was still frolicking. Arnus and his parents watched in horror as the creature covered two hundred metres in just a few seconds and brought the sword down on the neck of the animal. The hog didn't even have time to raise its head to see what it was that had the audacity to disturb this perfect morning bathe, before it became breakfast for a Throgloid.

Malrey stifled a scream and Tibras pulled them both into the house. He grabbed his gun and phone and hurried them both towards the entrance to the cellar under the stairs. He'd built the shelter under the house to protect them from tornados. The extreme pull of gravity from Amphora quite often caused freak weather conditions and all houses on Phorissi were fitted with early warning devices that could detect one of these twisting monsters as they were forming. The main cities were protected by a ring of neutralising stations that could fire an electro-magnetic pulse bomb into the centre of the tornado. When detonated, it equalised the pressure difference that had originally created the phenomenon

and the twister would dissipate harmlessly into the atmosphere. But in the more rural areas they had to rely on a sturdy shelter with an underground passage as a means of escape in the event of the house collapsing around them. Tibras wasn't sure whether it was their proximity to the forest or that they were just extremely lucky, but they hadn't ever been given cause to use the shelter until now.

He flicked the switch at the top of the stairs and a faint glow appeared from the room fifteen metres below. Arnus and his mum hurried down the stairs to the five-metre-wide space below as Tibras locked and barred the door at the top of the stairs. Inside the shelter, that had been carved out of the ground and lined with blocks, there were shelves covering one wall with enough supplies to last several weeks. They had water, food and fuel for cooking. At one end of the room was a door that led to the escape tunnel. This ran under the house to a steel hatch in the ground behind the wood shed, so that in the event of the house being completely levelled, they would not be trapped under the rubble. They had a table with three chairs and a monitor to allow them to watch the news so that they would know when it was safe to come out.

They sat down and Tibras reached across the table to hold his parent's hands. Malrey was sobbing gently so Arnus put his other arm around her to comfort her.

"What is it?" whispered Tibras.

"It's an alien Dad," said Arnus, with a little too much excitement in his tone for his mother's liking. He told them in as quiet a whisper as was possible about the vortex in the sky and the appearance of the spaceship, how it crashed through the trees without being destroyed and how the alien woke up and grabbed the stick from his hand. He was interrupted by a loud crash as the front door of the house slammed against the kitchen wall. His mother put her hand to her mouth to cover her gasp and his father calmly placed one finger on his lips and whispered, "Shhh."

Grrghracksh threw his decapitated breakfast onto the veranda and stepped through the open door, preceded by the pulse rifle. He had to crouch almost double to fit through the opening and once in the room he straightened up so that his head was just brushing the ceiling. They're obviously small he thought and smiled to himself whilst imagining the fun that he was about to have. He looked both ways and moved further into the room. He wished that he had a motion detector, but that was in the pod that the stupid tree had destroyed. It wasn't that he blamed the tree for falling on top of the pod, it was just buried deep in the DNA of a Throgloid warrior to blame anything other than themselves for their own blunders. It wouldn't even enter his head to berate himself for shooting down the tree. The tree should have fallen the other way. Differences of opinion on Throwgus, were rarely solved without bloodshed.

There were two doors leading from the room, so he chose one, ducked down and stuck the end of the rifle through before entering. It was obviously a comfort area with seats and a screen for watching entertainment. There was no way out of that room, so once he was certain that it was unoccupied, he crouched back into the eating area. The other door led to a corridor with a door at one end and stairs halfway along. The stairs were difficult for him to climb because they were only wide enough to accommodate half the length of his giant feet. So quietly, or at least as quietly as it was possible for a three-metre-tall lumbering oaf, he tip-toed up the stairs where he found two small sleeping accommodations. They also proved to be empty, so he gingerly headed back down stairs. This transpired to be slightly more hazardous than ascending and halfway down, both of his feet slipped off the step. Once the motion had been set in place there was no stopping it. He spun one hundred and eighty degrees, crashing on his head half-way up the stairs then began sliding on his front towards the floor below. He bumped and crashed his way to the bottom of the stairs like an overweight luge rider, where his head went straight through the flimsy wall opposite. Arnus

and his parents gripped each other's hands more tightly. From down in the cellar it sounded as though the monster was destroying their house piece by piece.

Grrghracksh pulled his head from the irregularly shaped hole in the wall, got to his feet and dusted himself off. This day was beginning to aggravate him. He moved stealthily down the corridor, even though any creatures present would certainly have been alerted to his arrival by now and he came to the final door which, judging from the light pouring through it, led to the outside. He kicked it so hard that it flew off its hinges and came to rest on a pile of wood that was obviously being prepared for construction. The yard was full of gardening and wood-working tools. Two wooden trestles supported lengths of timber that had been coated in preservative, and a neatly stacked pile of logs sheltered under a makeshift roof. He stooped to pick up the tiny axe that Arnus was forbidden from touching.

Under his father's supervision he'd had a couple of goes at splitting logs with it but could barely swing it over his head. Grrghracksh scoffed at the feeble looking weapon and hurled it at a tree some fifty metres away. The head of the axe embedded itself deep in the trunk of the tree and hundreds of leaves fluttered down from its branches.

Satisfied that the house was empty, Grrghracksh returned to the veranda where his breakfast awaited. He carried a pile of wood from the yard, which he used to build a fire, then ignited it with the laser on the pulse rifle. He fashioned a makeshift frame out of four poles and set the beast across the fire to cook. Whilst he was waiting for his food, he went inside and turned on their entertainment viewer to ascertain the sort of civilization that he was dealing with. There was a remote control on top of the screen which he picked up and attempted to press the first button, but even the tips of his fingers covered several buttons at once, so he looked around for something smaller with which to operate the control. He found a writing implement and used it to prod the red button at the top of the device.

The screen came to life and a creature, identical to the one that had run away but older looking, appeared. It was speaking some odd language that Grrghracksh couldn't understand. It was sat behind a desk, obviously reading words from a screen in front of it and he suspected that he was watching an information broadcast. He watched for a few minutes waiting for something useful to happen then the image cut to a scene outdoors, where another of the creatures was speaking into a stick with an odd-looking furry end. The creature was stood several hundred metres in front of an object that brought a warm glow to Grrghracksh's insides. It was primitive and probably little use as an escape method but there was no doubt that what he was looking at was a rocket, sat on a launch pad and ready to be fired away from this rock. As his brain connected all the thoughts, he smiled. Wherever there were rockets there were powerful communication installations to talk to those rockets. He kept on hearing the same word from the presenter, over and over-Torian. That was where he had to go.

First things first though. The smells that were wafting through the open door were making both of his stomachs rumble.

SURF'S UP

The lights in the control room gradually rose to a comfortable morning level and the crew slowly stirred. On any other occasion where they'd fallen asleep in a chair in front of the television, they would have all woken up with every part of their bodies aching, but the control room seats moulded their shape around the form of their bodies making them just about the most comfortable place in which to pass out, in the universe. They pushed back the covers that the drones had placed over them and the seats gradually adjusted their position, bringing them up into a sitting-but-not-quite-with-it position. Julie and Sara never had any problem getting up in the morning, unless of course they hadn't returned home until seven or eight o'clock. But Oli and Ed could happily sleep through the entire morning and encroach on afternoon time if left to their own devices.

"Time to get up," said Robbie, somewhat suspiciously.

As their eyes gradually allowed limited ability to focus, they saw that the screen was displaying a scene that Oli and Ed found very appealing. A perfect beach with long glassy swell rolling towards it in perfect sets of three or four and breaking from a clean point in either direction for at least one hundred metres out to sea.

"Now that's a surfing wave," said Oli, stretching, and much to the dismay of his fellow roommates, farting. "Oops," he offered by way of an apology, but was immediately joined in his morning chorus by Ed.

"Euch ... boys! Horrid boys!" Said Sara, already escaping from the control room wrapped in her blanket and running up to the house to change out of the clothes in which she'd slept. It was unusual for her to fall asleep in her clothes and when she did, she felt grubby and used, not helped by the first two sounds that had greeted her waking ears. Jay pulled back his cover, muttered something that was vaguely, but not entirely human in origin and went back to sleep.

"Where is that?" asked Ed, thinking that they could fly off and enjoy an early morning surf.

"About one hundred metres away," said Robbie, "right in front of the house."

Ed and Oli both leapt off their seats as though Robbie had sent a few thousand volts through them and looked across the control room at each other with the excitement that a child feels on Christmas morning as they encounter the sacks full of presents. They immediately remembered the quantity of Proper Job that they had consumed the previous night and toned down the pace of their excitement, continuing at a more measured gait. It would appear that Robbie's burst of Gamma radiation, although removing all the joyous effects of the alcohol, left the recipient with the downside of a Trojan-sized hangover in the morning.

They were half-way out of the room to collect their boards from the house and somehow, they hadn't yet quite worked out the details, climb down the cliff and make use of this perfect and more to the point, empty surf, when Robbie called after them.

"I've taken the liberty of fetching your boards and wetsuits from the house. They're in the cave waiting for you. I've also constructed a small tunnel leading to the beach with a matter-transform exit. So, if you would care to get changed and to coin a phrase; let's go surfing now!"

At that moment, in through the door walked Robbie the surf chick, board in hand, wearing surfing shorts and swim top. Ed was about to suggest that she would freeze in that outfit but then thought better of it. They ran out of the ship where sure enough, they found all their gear. They pulled on their wetsuits, which had that wonderful wetsuit that's been hung up for a while smell, and followed Robbie down the tunnel to the beach, much to

the delight of Julie who'd curled back up on her seat and pulled the blanket over her head. Robbie dimmed the lights again, after all it was only six in the morning. Nobody heard the muffled scream as Sara reached her bedroom and scrutinised her clock through misty, half-closed eyes.

The three surfers reached the end of the tunnel, where they found to one side, a small screen. Oli knew what to do and placed his hand on the screen activating the matter transform. The rock face shimmered and disappeared leaving an arched doorway to the beach, but not just any beach; this was their own personal beach with no other surfers in sight. There were no pathways down from the top of the cliff and to reach this spot from anywhere else, you would need a boat.

The house was perched on the end of a narrow peninsular, so apart from having an ocean view directly in front, both sides of the property looked out over small coves. One facing north and the other south. The two headlands extended about fifty metres out to sea with fingers of jagged rock preventing anybody, even at low tide, from walking to their beach. Facing west, right in front of Oli and Ed was a sandy beach with clean Atlantic waves rolling in, calling out to them to come and play.

At the same instant, it dawned on Ed and Oli that this was their very own surf break and it was working. Robbie hadn't seen such genuine, unadulterated joy on the face of a human since he'd handed Galileo Galilei his first telescope. They ran down the short stretch of sand to the sea and began to paddle out through the surf. Robbie had brushed up on surfing technique while they were asleep, and she leapt into the water with her board in front of her and landed with her torso perfectly flat on the board then began to paddle. Oli and Ed watched in disbelief as Robbie powered past them, leaving a wake like a small speed boat and literally took off over the first wave. She was out back past the break, sitting on her board before the others had even pushed through the white foam near the beach. Relieved that no one was there to witness their humiliation, they persevered, pushing under each crashing wave and paddling as fast as they could to reach the next one before it broke. Eventually they joined Robbie, puffing and panting in the glass-smooth water beyond the break. The sun hadn't even risen high enough to clear the cliff yet and the light on the sea was ghostly. The only sound was that of the distant waves crashing onto the beach.

"What time is it?" asked Ed, not used to seeing this strange and somehow magical time of day.

"Time for you to start paddling," shouted Oli, pointing towards the dark, growing mass of water barrelling in towards them. Ed and Oli turned on their boards and paddled furiously, glancing back every few seconds to make sure that they were correctly positioned to catch the start of the breaking wave. Robbie held back for a while enjoying the sight of his friends having such an epic start to the day.

Oli was first to catch the wave and he leapt to his feet and carved the inside rail into the wave to change course and stay on top of it. Immediately after him, Ed made the final last dig with his arm and as he felt the board accelerate down the face of the wave, he leapt to his feet and joined Oli on the glassy face. They whooped and hollered as they engraved their own personal moniker into the fast-moving wall of water keeping just ahead of the breaking section of wave. Just then Robbie appeared over the back of the wave and dropped in on them about five metres in front of Oli.

"Think we just got dropped in on," shouted Ed, not really caring about surf protocol.

Robbie the surf chick joined in the whooping and left Oli and Ed open-mouthed as she carved across the wave and pulled off a perfect tail slide along the lip of the wave. They were so blown away by witnessing the manoeuvre that neither of them had ever managed to get close to, being performed with such ease, that they crashed into each other and wiped out.

Once the wave had had its wicked way with them, rolling them around in the washing machine, it spat them out the back and they surfaced laughing and whooping. As they looked down the back of the disappearing wave, they could see Robbie's head bobbing up and down followed by great arcs of spray as she slashed the top of the wave. They gave each other a look that said I think we've been out-classed somewhat and headed back out for another go.

After an hour of the most perfect conditions that either Ed or Oli had ever known, they agreed that their arms were hanging off with fatigue and so headed for shore. Robbie obviously could have continued for the rest of the day and into the night, but she came with them. The tide was coming in and the wash from the waves was lapping up against the rocks on the shoreline. They agreed that their very own surf beach was a low-tide-only venue. Robbie directed them to a hand-sized fissure in the rock face and Oli placed his hand inside. The rock face melted away to reveal the entrance to the cave.

"Best day ever?" asked Oli. Ed agreed, and they turned to Robbie who said, "Undoubtedly, the experience of utilising the kinetic energy transmitted across an ocean to power oneself along an all-too-short, it has to be said, formation of water molecules was a pleasant experience, but best day ever? I think that has to go to the day that I won the artificial intelligence open sub-light asteroid run of 46067/35." Seeing their bemused looks she quickly continued, "But, yeah man that was totally rad." and put her hand up for a high five, which both Ed and Oli chose to ignore, leaving her hanging, looking like a somewhat incongruous Nazi.

When they reached the house to get changed, Ed noticed that it was 7:30am, a time that only existed in his mind as leaving a club and heading for an after party. Sara had gone back to bed in disgust and Julie was still sound asleep in the control room of the ship. Ordinarily both Ed and Oli would have been apoplectic about being woken at such an inhuman hour, but following such a start to the day they had no complaints.

After changing, they went down to the kitchen to make some coffee. Proper Earth coffee made in a cafetiere was so much more palatable than the Annenian Kharfee that was served up by the ship's food maker. They were both hyped up by the experiences of the early morning and were verbally playing back some of the most exciting rides that they'd had. Ed was stopped in mid-sentence by the sound of a car pulling up on the driveway.

"Who the hell is that?" asked Oli, looking around for any evidence of their secret lives.

They ran out to see Stephan climbing out of his BMW 5 series.

"Hey, Stephan!" called Oli, running across the gravel to greet his friend. "What brings you here at this a-typical time of day?"

"Bad news I'm afraid," said Stephan, accepting Oli's hug in the way that any person would when they'd spent their entire life mixing with men who would rather be shot in the foot, than be seen hugging another man. "Can we go inside?"

They went to the kitchen where the kettle was whistling a merry old tune on the Aga. Oli began to pour the coffee, somewhat perturbed that anything could come along and spoil their perfect mood. The day had barely begun, and it was already the best day ever; surely that feeling could not turn out to be so short-lived.

"It's Uncle Rupert," said Stephan, taking the steaming cup of black coffee from Oli, "he's dead."

They both offered him their apologies and Oli pulled his chair next to Stephan and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"He died two days ago, and Aunt Jennifer, his second wife, who I might add is a total fire-breather, has said that she's going to sell everything and move to Spain of all places. Apparently, they haven't been speaking for about ten years. That's why Uncle Rupert was so

totally engrossed in his work. The silly old fool hadn't made a will, so all of his estate passes to the wicked witch of the west."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," said Oli, slightly taken aback by Stephan's bile towards the woman. He'd never heard Stephan say a single bad word about anyone in the short time that he'd known him. She must be a dragon of monumental proportions, he thought.

"I know you got on really well with your uncle. Why don't you stay down here for a while? We'll cheer you up."

Stephan looked at Oli and Ed's smiling faces and realised that two plus two hadn't quite achieved the inevitable conclusion, so he elaborated.

"This house belonged to Uncle Rupert; now it belongs to Aunt Jennifer." He waited a few seconds for the news to penetrate their euphoria.

"Oh crap," said Ed, the smile instantly disappearing from his face.

"Where will we go? and more importantly, where will Robbie go?"

They couldn't believe what they were hearing. Just five minutes ago, everything was perfect. They had the secret hideout with its own surf beach and a pub just five minutes down the hill. This was heaven; you could keep your white fluffy clouds with angels serenading the gathered masses of pious inheritors of the Kingdom of God. Heaven was right here, right now and they were about to be kicked out of it. How would they ever find such a perfect location as this one?

"Did you hear that Robbie?" asked Oli, but there was no reply. "He's probably engrossed in some mega game where he has control of the entire universe from an iPhone. We'd better go and tell him."

Ed ran upstairs and raised a very disgruntled Sara from a joyous dream about swimming with dolphins and they proceeded to the cave. This was Stephan's first venture into the newly-extended lair and he was most amused by the mode of entry. When they reached the control room, the lights were still dimmed, and Julie was bundled into a heap on her seat. Following a quick and extremely quiet game of scissor-paper-stone, which she lost, Sara cautiously walked over to the sleeping Julie. They all knew from experience, that a sleeping Julie was best left sleeping.

"Sweetie," she whispered, accompanied by the gentlest of taps on Julie's arm. "Sweetie," this time with a gentle shake of her shoulder. Julie murmured and rolled over the other way. "That's as far as I'm prepared to go," said Sara, raising her hands in submission and moving away from her sleeping friend.

"Robbie!" shouted Oli, hoping to kill two birds with one stone.

"What the ...?" shouted Robbie and Julie in perfect unison. "Oh sorry," said Robbie, "I was miles away. What's up?"

"Quite a lot's up," said Oli. "Where's Jay?"

"No Idea. He must have got up and disappeared while I was playing twenty thousand people at backgammon whilst trying to analyse the magnetic activity within the sun."

"Show off," muttered Ed.

"We have a slight problem," understated Oli. He explained the situation to Robbie and a slowly reviving Julie.

"Right ... and ...?" asked Robbie, obviously failing to grasp the gravity of the situation.

"Well, I just can't believe it," said Oli. "We've found the perfect place for everything and we're going to have to move out ... oh, and Stephan has lost his favourite uncle," he added as an afterthought, fully aware that they were being ever so slightly egocentric.

“Sorry?” said Robbie, sounding somewhat confused. “Why don’t we just buy the house?”

“You’re not on Annenia now.” said Oli. “Here on Earth if you want to own a house you must work and earn money and in the case of this house, a lorry-load of money.”

“Let me explain to you the concept of money and wealth from the perception of someone who’s seen it all come and go,” said Robbie.

Flaps opened in the arms of the chairs and a Neural Feed Set appeared in each one. Stephan sat in Jay’s chair and picked up the impossibly light headset, making the same mistake that everyone made when they first put on an NFS. “It goes on your temples,” offered Oli, demonstrating the correct position. Before Stephan even had time to ask if it was going to hurt, he experienced a green flash in the backs of his eyes and he was suddenly aware that he had visually clear memories that had not been present before. During the micro-second of time that the neural download took to embed itself deep within the limbic system of the brain, Robbie had given them all a detailed history of Annenian financial development.

Annenians, like every other emergent civilisation had evolved from primitive life and as they discovered useful elements, these elements had been given a value for trading purposes. As their population grew, long before they’d even begun to dream about space flight, certain individuals took control of the valuable resources and became wealthy and powerful. There were parts of Annenia that were rich in resources and other’s that were barren. Wars were fought over the control of these rich areas, not by the wealthy owners, but by the poor Annenians who hadn’t managed to secure any part in this global game of-who’s got the most at the end.

The working Annenians were rewarded for their labours with tokens that they could exchange for goods and services; the harder they worked or the higher up the ladder they managed to climb, the more significant were the rewards that came their way. In the early days, these tokens possessed an intrinsic value. They were manufactured from precious materials and were essentially worth their weight, but the Annenians in charge of the distribution of these tokens got together and worked out that they could keep all the valuable gold, silver and every other precious mineral for themselves if only they could convince the population that some completely arbitrary and worthless token could represent the actual wealth. The Annenians, who were always up for an easy life, even in those days, were quite willing to exchange the heavy, cumbersome tokens for a considerably more user-friendly form of exchange and so accepted it with open arms. Then taking the next perfectly logical step, the controllers of the tokens persuaded the working Annenians to store their tokens within the safe confines of large organisations that could manage and increase their value, which was always going to be close to, if not completely, zero.

With virtually everyone on the planet using these companies to guard their tokens, the controllers of the tokens found that they had an unlimited supply of the essentially worthless but none the less intensely useful token power with which to pursue the very tangible wealth that lay within the planet. Control of all the physical wealth would mean control of all the virtual wealth and thus control of everything and everyone on Annenia. They also deduced that if they lent the workers more tokens than they would ever be able to earn by themselves, then they would essentially own those workers until they had paid back the full amount, usually for the entire productive period of their lives. It wasn’t exactly slavery, but to locate the dividing line required some heavy-duty magnifying equipment.

The largest quantity of tokens that any Annenian would ever need was for purchasing or building a home, so the controllers of the tokens got together and fixed the amount that a worker would have to pay back each year so that they were left with no option other than to work full time to cover their debts. This not only ensured a regular and captive

workforce but also prevented the workers from having any spare time with which to ascend the ladder. The fact that the quantity of tokens that they were obliged to find each year, to cover their debts and provide food for their families, almost exactly matched the amount that they could earn, should have been ringing some resounding warning bells.

Annenians were by no means fools and many workers who'd managed to climb the slippery ladder to lofty positions within the large corporations were fully aware of the con; they were working for rewards that had no real value. But because these worthless tokens could be used further down the ladder in exchange for goods, services and fundamentally, small scraps of power that had fallen from the top table, they had no real incentive to rock the completely out of control ship that was ploughing through their planet and their lives, leaving a trail of poor unfortunates in its wake.

Until one revolutionary Annenian controller of tokens called Ansshly decided that enough was enough. The planet was being dismantled piece by piece; there were millions of Annenians going hungry when there existed on the planet more than enough of everything to go around. She began the Free World organisation; whose goal it was to provide free energy to the entire planet. She happened to own the largest solar power manufacturing company on Annenia, as well as owning about fifteen per cent of fossil fuel production worldwide. Along with Ssrindo, the most eminent mind of his time, she began work on the solar pyramid that would eradicate the necessity to burn the fuels that were destroying their planet.

Many attempts were made on her life by the other controllers of wealth who, unlike Ansshly, were not willing to give up their power for the good of all Annenians and she was eventually forced to live deep within the very structure that she had devoted her life to building. The pyramid was completed and linked into the power grids across Annenia. With free power came free water and free air. Everything was good around Annenia and even the diehard power mongers eventually came around to a more equality-based way of thinking. The only Annenians who couldn't grasp the new order of things were those who had knowledge of the laws. Previously, every action required one of these law-folk to guide you through the nightmarish maze of gobbledygook that had been constructed over thousands of years with the sole objective of keeping these people in work. When they were no longer required, they insisted on continuing their pointless meanderings and so were given their own island called Lllawland, where eventually they sued each other out of existence.

Over the course of the next eight hundred years, the need to earn tokens was eliminated completely. They discovered how to construct food from random molecules and although a molecularly constructed vegetable wasn't entirely as satisfying to a connoisseur as one grown in the ground, they had an unlimited supply so long as there were atoms in the universe.

Glurk was located deep within the planet's core, which led to the discovery of graviton technology. They were no longer confined to their planet or in fact to their star system, and the Graviton Generator could supply power to new worlds. Housing shortages on Annenia were solved by building great skyscrapers, many thousands of storeys high, but if someone wanted to live in the country next to a babbling brook, no problem; there were millions of machines buzzing around the planet whose function it was to serve the population.

But with everything provided for them and no need to work to earn enough to survive, there were serious concerns that the population would become lazy and complacent and for a certain time, this did happen. In the history books, they called this period the fatty fatty fat fat years (rough translation).

Then one year, an exploration vessel, Thataway, was leaving the Annenian system when it narrowly avoided running straight into a massive asteroid. The rock was twenty

kilometres across and heading on a bull's-eye collision course with Annenia. If it had been allowed to strike the planet, it would have marked the end of their home world. They had enough ships to get a substantial number of Annenians off the planet to restart their race somewhere new, but billions of Annenians would have died.

The entire planet came together and used all their combined intellect to knock the asteroid off its course and a party that covered the entire globe lasted for three weeks, until the last million or so were standing.

Following this joint effort, the Annenian race never looked back; they pulled together as one and headed for the stars. The Annenian desire to explore and learn, forced them to utilise their combined talents to build ships, capable of travelling at many times the speed of light, taking them to new worlds and new adventures. Obviously no Annenian was even remotely interested in performing menial tasks, such as cleaning or digging holes in the ground or, mythical creature forbid conveyancing, so machines were designed for every task imaginable.

The reward for excellence was the fact that everyone else knew that you were excellent. There were of course, those that just meandered through life travelling from planet to planet and party to party, but that was fine just so long as they were content. If they got bored of their nomadic existence, they could easily drop in to any of the millions of learning centres dotted around the explored part of the galaxy and walk out two minutes later with the ability to Annoform a planet, or pilot a non-AI star ship. Money and wealth were consigned to the history books, never to show their ugly mugs again.

“So, you see,” said Robbie, as everyone placed their NFS back into the flap in the seat, “capitalism is just a phase that you’re going through. Eventually, and I have to say,” he continued in an accusatory voice, “you should be considerably closer to the goal than you are; money will become redundant, and what do you think will happen to all those numbers on computers and bits of paper that litter the planet? Will they be gathered up and spent on a new planet? No! Because they ... are ... worthless.”

He left them in silence for a few seconds as they tried to take it all in, then continued.

“So, I’ve taken the liberty of opening an offshore bank account in the name of Mum, an acronym for Made Up Money, and placed one million pounds in it. That should be enough, shouldn’t it? When the property comes on the market, I’ll offer them the asking price, saying that I’m representing a wealthy foreign buyer. The bank will transfer my fictitious set of numbers to your aunt’s bank and the house will belong to Mum.”

“Genius!” yelled Oli, not really understanding anything about banks or money for that matter. Money goes in pocket; money goes out of pocket, was about the limit of his fiscal appreciation.

“But won’t the offshore bank realise that this account has just appeared out of nowhere with a considerable amount of money attached to it?” asked Stephan, being in possession of a slightly more acute comprehension of matters financial. Oli gave him a wry grin as if to say, this is Robbie mate; he can do anything.

“As far as the pre-sentient computers at the bank are aware,” he said, almost sneering at the very idea that they should be mentioned in the same breath as himself, “the account has existed for more than thirty years and they have thirty years of transactions at their disposal for examination.”

“But isn’t it stealing?” asked Sara, in Ed’s opinion, completely overlooking the plethora of plus sides.

“Stealing what?” asked Robbie. “It’s a number on a computer screen. And when it’s sent to the aunt’s bank, it’ll be another number on a computer screen. I know it’s hard to grasp, but money is worthless.”

“I understand that,” said Sara, “but whether we like it or not, this planet and its inhabitants are still very much reliant on it in all of its forms. I mean, what if we want to go to the pub or say for instance ... ah ...” she placed a melodramatic finger on the side of her face, as though she was actually thinking about what to say next ... “I see a really nice pair of shoes for sale in town ... er, in the shop next to the bakers, for instance? What are we supposed to do then?”

“One second,” said Robbie.

A faint glow appeared from the food maker on the wall of the control room and a pile of flat objects appeared on the circular plate in the middle. Everyone jumped up and crowded around the opening as Oli reached in and picked up the six cards. He pulled one off the top and held it out for everyone to see. It was made of plastic or some Annenian version of plastic and was shiny black in colour, but there was no writing or name on it. He turned it over and realised that the back was as blank as the front, or the front was as blank as the back, he wasn’t sure.

“Those will work in any cash machine in any country on the planet,” said Robbie. “If you really must maintain this antiquated method of exchange, you might as well have access to an unlimited supply of it. The cards are coded to your synaptic signatures, you can all use each other’s cards but nobody else can. I’ve set up a Standing Order to Mum’s account from every bank in the world’s bonus funds. They’ll never run out of imaginary tokens and nor will you. But please use them sensibly, we don’t want to draw attention to ourselves ... Oli!”

The image of a British racing green, Aston Martin Vanquish, parked outside the house had clearly formed in Oli’s head.

“Yes mum!” he said, as the image burst like a soap bubble.

“I’m going up to the house to see if Jay is in his room,” said Sara, placing the card in her pink flowery purse and purposefully clicking it shut.

Stephan handed his card back to Oli, saying that he really didn’t need it. He had plenty of his own money and whilst the idea of having an unconstrained supply appealed in one way, it also felt rather hypocritical. He was comfortable and didn’t really want for anything. That was enough for him. After all, did unrestricted wealth bring his uncle happiness? No, and as he thought about it, most of the fabulously rich people who he knew and worked with, lived in fear of the day that it was all taken away from them. Oli and the crew were the least affluent people whom he had ever known, so long as he didn’t take into consideration the Egyptians, and they were also pretty content. He reiterated Robbie’s warning.

“Don’t go mad with the cards guys. Just carry on as you are and use them to continue living just the way that you do now. Trust me on this one.”

Oli assured them both that he was more than satisfied with his lot in life. After all, he had a great group of friends, his own beach on which to surf and of course a spaceship that could take them anywhere that they wanted. Besides, he wasn’t the type of person to desire the latest in fashion or the most up-to-date smart phone that everyone else seemed hooked on. His clothes were few, yet pragmatic and his phone was most definitely pre-smart; it could be better described as a village idiot phone. Ed and Julie both agreed and they all had a group hug to seal the deal. Julie beckoned for Stephan to join the hug and he reluctantly acquiesced.

“I can’t vouch for Sara though,” said Julie with a knowing smile. “She does love her clothes that girl and as for shoes ... well let’s just see, shall we?”

They were all laughing at the prospect of Sara walking past a shoe shop with the knowledge that within her purse there lay the path to bottomless cash, as she walked into the control room. They immediately stopped laughing and grinned inanely at her.

“Whaaaaat?” she asked, knowing full well that she’d just been the butt of some joke.

“Nothing sweetie.” said Julie. “We were just discussing your wardrobe habits.”

Sara was fully aware that they all found her fascination with clothes rather entertaining, but that’s who she was; she liked pretty things and she made no attempt to hide the fact.

“Jay’s gone,” she said, brushing aside her friend’s childishness as one would a persistent fly. “His rucksack is gone, and he’s taken his signed photo of Usain Bolt with him. No note, no nothing.”

“He’s on the 08:25 train from Truro to London Paddington,” said Robbie, after locating Jay’s mobile phone signal.

“What?” said Ed. “No goodbye or explanation? What’s he playing at? Can you call him Robbie?”

“It’s already ringing,” said Robbie, as the sound of a ring tone filled the control room. It rang several times and then the voicemail message kicked in.

“Try it again,” said Oli, showing signs of real concern for his friend. But there was no answer, just voicemail once more. Jay had always been slightly aloof when compared with the total openness of the others, but he’d never behaved in quite such an odd manner. He was always a denizen of politeness and good manners; this was totally out of character.

“We’ve got to find him before he does something stupid.” said Ed marching straight into the real crisis point. “I mean we’re a team, we have secrets to keep, really ... massive ... secrets! If one of us goes AWOL, it could jeopardise the whole thing and the fact that he’s not answering his phone means that he doesn’t want us to speak to him.”

“Ed’s right.” said Oli, struggling not to think the worst of his close friend, but finding no other course down which to travel. “Can we intercept the train?”

“What? Fly through the countryside in broad daylight and drop you off at a station where it’s scheduled to stop?” questioned Robbie, with an obvious tone to his voice that made it unnecessary to resolve the question with an answer.

“Well, we can’t take the flying car for similar reasons,” said Oli. Then in the few seconds of silence that ensued a minute cloud of clarity formed inside his head. Stephan suddenly realised that Oli was giving him that same puppy dog pleading look that he’d used on the flight to Egypt, when asking if he could have a look inside the pyramid. That’s where this had all started, he thought. The lost night’s sleep, the complete loss of motivation for his job, the forced leave from work that his uncle had suggested. What now?

“How fast is your car?” Oli asked, knowing full well that Stephan’s one-year-old car was good for at least twice the speed limit. “I mean, the train has to stop, doesn’t it? You could easily reach London before Jay, meet him at the station and find out what he’s playing at.”

“I’ll come with you,” offered Sara, without a moment’s thought. “I have a feeling that this will require a woman’s touch.”

Stephan agreed to do it and was assured by Robbie that no speed cameras from the west country to London would be functioning properly all day. He also said that he would track their journey and warn them through Sara’s Go-ring if there were any police cars nearby. Stephan, suddenly, was looking forward to finding out what his pride and joy was capable of. They said their goodbyes and Stephan left in a cloud of gravel dust, grinning across his face, whilst Sara, looking mildly concerned, tapped her Go-ring for added security.

“And then there were three,” said Ed, turning his head as the dust storm floated their way.

“Ahem . . .” came a body-less clearing of throat.

“Sorry Robbie, I meant four.” Ed corrected himself through gritted teeth.

It had taken the best part of five hundred years for artificially intelligent entities to be accepted into the Annenian pack. Robbie was not going through all that again.

Ed, Julie and Oli were sat at the kitchen table marvelling at the quantity of stuff they had already crammed into the day. Over a cup of coffee, they attempted to try and work out what it was that Jay was up to. He didn't seem to be upset about anything. In fact, quite the opposite; he was totally buzzed about plucking up the courage to walk outside the ship under water and not to mention talking to the whales. He'd been more animated when telling the stories than they'd ever seen him before. It was difficult, when they'd all got used to being able to work things out at lightning speed, or rather watch Robbie work things out at lightning speed, to now be forced to wait for a stupid train to arrive. It kind of brought them all back to Earth with a slap.

“What time does the pub open?” asked Julie, through a cupped hand as though covering the fact that she'd uttered the words. Oli and Ed both snorted before realising that she was being serious.

“Twelve I think,” said Oli.

“Lunch?” asked Julie, with a shake of her head as though asking them if this was a bad idea.

Ed and Oli looked at each other, searching in vain for any reason whatsoever to dismiss Julie's suggestion. Then both turned back to her and said, “Yup,” together.

They had a couple of hours to kill, so Julie went up to Jay's room to see if she could spot any clues that might explain his behaviour and Ed and Oli headed for the ship with a view to seeing what was on offer in the games room.

Doctor David Branith had been on high alert ever since he'd had to watch helplessly as the little ship floated up and out through the roof of the hangar. He'd had it locked down and felt sure that given enough time he would have opened it and learnt all the secrets that lay within. He'd managed to keep secret, the sighting of the massive craft moving at phenomenal speeds towards the Earth. If he'd had any idea of the true intent of the Throgloid commander at that time, he probably wouldn't have been quite so calm about it. He hadn't really had any sleep since the craft disappeared, nor for that matter had George, his assistant.

They couldn't obtain permission to use the RadarX satellite that they'd utilised to track the Throgloid ship, but they still had the Earth-based radars that could scan the skies around the world. His wife and children were beginning to wonder if he existed any longer. He would come home after ten o'clock at night and be gone from the house when they all awoke the next day. He'd assured them by text, that what he was working on would make him famous and that they should be patient.

George was analysing various radar signals from the previous day's recordings when he stopped, replayed a section and replayed it again in slow motion. He called Doctor Branith over to his desk.

“Look Doctor,” he said, pointing to the bottom left corner of the screen.

“What?” asked Doctor Branith, sliding his reading glasses further down his nose to enable him to peer over the top of them.

George located the beginning of the five-second recording and hit play again but this time he paused it after just two seconds.

“There,” he said, once again pointing at the same section of the screen.

This time Doctor Branith could just about make out a blurry streak about one-centimetre long. George clicked the recording forward, one frame at a time and the object followed a jerky path across the screen and then disappeared.

“Firstly George,” said Doctor Branith, straightening up and pushing his glasses back up his nose, “how the hell did you spot that and secondly, what is it?”

“It’s an object, comparable in size to the small ship, moving from well outside of our radar area to sea level in the space of about two seconds.”

“But that’s the middle of the ocean.” said Doctor Branith. “Did it crash?”

“I don’t think so,” said George, lapping up the attention, “I cross checked it with a live shipping tracker and the position where we lose contact was the exact position of that stricken oil tanker.”

Doctor Branith held his hands up requesting more information.

“Oh of course,” said George, realising that his boss had barely enough time to shower and shave between obsessing about the space craft, let alone catch up on world affairs.

“It’s been all over the news Doctor. There was a collision between two ships, one sunk and the super tanker was holed and sinking. They were preparing for a massive ecological disaster. Next thing we hear is that the tanker is fine and making its way to its destination.” He looked round at Doctor Branith expectantly.

“So, you think that the ship came down to Earth to rescue the tanker,” said Doctor Branith, obviously not fully immersed in George’s party, “... and you think that I need a break.” He patted George on the shoulder and went back to his office.

George watched the recording a few more times and then had an idea. He was ninety per cent certain that what he was looking at on the screen was the alien ship, but Doctor Branith was right to be sceptical. After all, what were they meant to do about it? fly out to Washington and check the ship for signs of alien intervention? Their yearly budget scarcely stretched to a Christmas party with a bottle of Asti Spumante, let alone flights to America on a wild hunch. He thought about it for a while then made a copy of the radar signature of the object from the clearest frame in the sequence and copied it into the computer that was automatically scanning the skies for anomalies. Now theoretically, the moment that the craft entered the atmosphere within the sweep of one of their radars, it would alert him to its presence. He figured that he’d just keep this to himself for the time being and only inform Doctor Branith when he had something concrete to report. He knew that Doctor Branith respected him as a fellow scientist, but if he could find the alien ship, the doctor would respect him as an equal. He smiled at the image in his head of Doctor Branith shaking his hand in front of their captive prize.

Oli, Ed and Julie were just about ready to leave for their lunchtime appointment with Harry when Robbie called them down to the cave.

“Sara just contacted me.” he said. “They reached Paddington Station twenty minutes before the train and I guided them to his phone and guess what they found?”

“I don’t know,” said Ed. “A chorus of nuns singing Alleluia for here is Jay?” Oli sniggered. Ed’s sarcasm always brought a smile to his face; Oli wasn’t capable of sarcasm and it amused him endlessly just how effortlessly Ed could find the most ludicrous twist to anything.

“No,” said Robbie emphasising the ‘o’ like a teenage child refusing to clean their room. “They found his phone. He’d abandoned it on the train. I think this leaves us in no doubt whatsoever that Jay does not wish to be found. We need to secure the area and make every effort to find him.”

They went around the house clearing anything Annenian by nature down to the cave; they changed the entry code for the door and they reconvened in the ship to discuss a plan. Robbie had told Sara that they would pick her up from the usual spot in Richmond Park after sun-down. Meanwhile Stephan was going to drive over to Jay's old flat in Putney to see if he'd gone there and Robbie would continue to trace any use of Jay's bank and credit cards. Apart from that, there was very little that they could do until Jay wanted to be found.

"Well, if there's nothing more to be done," said Julie, "I'd like to refer you back to my previous point."

"Which was?" asked Ed.

"Pub?" asked Julie.

Unable once more to find any reason why lunch in the pub was a bad idea, they agreed.

SOMETHING ABOUT A BAR

The guards on the gate were already dead, taken out with silenced pistols, as one of them slid the window aside and asked the driver of the van for identification. The security officers guarding the desk in reception had also met with a short sharp end to their careers and more importantly their lives, and the four heavily-armed men had placed motion-detecting explosives around the entrance to the building before making their way into the heart of the complex. The months of planning that had led to this operation had been orchestrated to perfection. Thanks to the janitor that had been planted in the complex more than six months previously, they had obtained all the necessary passwords allowing them to breach the control room of the power plant in less than two minutes. The scientists and engineers whose job it was to maintain the one thousand one hundred and fifty Mega Watt electric that the nuclear power station produced, offered no resistance as the four, armed men burst into the control room. They were bundled into a side room, ordered to sit silently on the floor and were assured that any noise or trouble would result in their immediate demise. They obeyed, not daring to even cough. The reality of the situation was that they were only alive to prevent a stray bullet from damaging the controls.

One of the assailants kept guard on the door whilst the others swept through the building gathering up any stragglers. Ten minutes later, the room was full of terrified men and women sitting on the floor, many of them consoling their less resilient colleagues, and the gunmen had free run of the power plant. They separated. Two stayed in the control room and began flicking switches and pressing buttons with the expertise of those who'd spent their entire working life learning the operating systems. The other two made their way to the reactor room, where the reinforced concrete cylinder containing the reactor itself was housed. They pulled two battery-powered hammer drills from the holdalls that they were straining to carry and drilled several deep holes around the base of the concrete, placing explosive devices in the holes as they went. The explosives expert with whom they had confided during the planning stages had calculated that to rupture the one-metre-thick steel-reinforced concrete, they would need a total of fifty kilos of RDX demolition explosive. Since they didn't really care what happened to the surrounding area or any of the captured workers, they increased that figure to eighty. This twenty-metre-high concrete tower would crack like an egg, thus exposing the core of uranium to the atmosphere. The men in the control room were busy extracting the Boron control rods that regulated the reaction rate and they were also sabotaging the plethora of back-up safety systems that would automatically shut down the reactor if there was even the slightest hint of a problem.

Thirty minutes later they reunited in the control room and waited. They didn't have long to wait. An alarm had been triggered in the energy company's head office in Liverpool across the bay, declaring a state of emergency. The flow of carbon dioxide gas used to cool the reactor had been halted and with all the control rods extracted, the reactor was beginning to overheat. When the managers were unable to contact the station, they alerted the authorities and a whole sequence of pre-planned responses were put in place. A small army, based just outside Chester was on its way to the power plant in several troop-carrying trucks, escorted by two armoured personnel carriers. Corporal Jones, a name for which he had suffered more than a little ribbing throughout his career, was reassuring the men under his command that this was no drill. The day-to-day drudgery of drill practice followed by drill practice, was in many ways preferable to being posted on the front line of whichever sand-infested hellhole the British government had deemed temporarily of strategic importance, but this small piece of action was welcomed throughout the ranks.

Holywell was the newest nuclear power station in England; it had only been commissioned the previous year. James Bauer, the head of Holywell Energy couldn't believe

that something had gone wrong so soon. They had in place safety measures for the safety measures for the safety measures; every eventuality had been predicted, simulated and resolved. There was no way that the myriad backup systems that were designed to prevent a core meltdown could have failed simultaneously. Against his better judgment, he jumped into his car and drove towards the plant, a million thoughts squabbling for attention within his brain.

Several army helicopters were now circling overhead, and the convoy of trucks loaded with troops was approaching the gates. Once they ascertained the fate of the guards, they proceeded with due diligence to the main building. Corporal Jones and his men alighted from the ten-tonne truck, fanned out and proceeded towards the building on foot.

James Bauer had just reached the A56 and was driving faster than he'd ever driven in his extremely conservative life, when his phone rang. He nearly lost control of the car as he scrambled in his jacket pocket. He looked at the number that had appeared on his phone and didn't recognise it, so he cancelled the call. He really didn't have time to talk to some idiot about claiming for an accident that he'd never had but was likely to if he didn't start concentrating. He slammed the brakes on to avoid running into the back of a car that had just pulled into the outside lane. As he was flashing his lights and thumping the horn the phone rang again. It was the same number. They don't usually ring twice he thought and pressed the answer key whilst accelerating past the other driver who had finally taken the rather unsubtle hint and pulled into the middle lane following a judicious use of the middle finger.

"Yes, this is Jim Bauer."

The heavily-accented voice relayed his worst nightmare in one monotone, emotionally barren sentence.

"The reactor is mined with high explosives. If anyone enters the building, we blow it." The line cut, as did James Bauer's life expectancy by a figure greater than ten.

He had the commander of the armed response unit's number in his phone and immediately called him and relayed the message.

That would hold them for a while, thought Naeem, the leader of the terrorists. The fools would now wait for their demands, which would never come. The reactor had to be critical before they blew the protective outer casing for maximum effect. His moment of glory was almost upon him; in just one hour he would be greeted as a hero in the after-life. He wasn't too bothered about the seventy-two virgins because, unbeknown to his fellow plotters of mayhem and death, his sexual proclivities lay elsewhere. He seriously doubted that his god would provide for his regrettable needs. But hey, you never know. If his actions led to the demise of enough of the infidels, well, anything was possible.

"I've no idea what's with those kids." said Harry as Oli, Ed and Julie ran out of the pub door, leaving a table full of unfinished food and beer.

"Probably your missus's cooking, 'Arry." said the old bearded man who was always sat in the same position at the bar. Oli had actually nudged him a couple of times just to be sure that he wasn't a manikin. He had his very own tankard hanging above the bar on an old rusty hook and he always drank Proper Job beer whilst constantly working a Fisherman's Friend around his toothless mouth. Oli always thought, that's what was so great about old Cornish pubs; whatever stereotype you fancied on any day, would usually be provided free of charge.

Robbie had called Oli on his phone and told him that they had an emergency. The tone of Robbie's voice had convinced Oli that this was no wind up and they sprinted up the hill. Gasping for breath and doubled over with stitches, Oli and Ed entered the control room where Julie was calmly resting in her seat, not a single hair out of place. Her feet were slightly crossed on the control panel and an emery board gently worked away at her already

perfect nails. She tutted and raised her eyebrows as the boys entered in waves of asthmatic wheezes.

“A group of terrorists has taken over the Holywell nuclear power station near Liverpool.” Robbie began before they were even in their seats. “They’ve disabled the reactor and are threatening to blow it up.”

An image of five men sitting casually on the edge of a wall of controls appeared on the screen.

“As you can see, they’re not in any hurry to make demands or give any reasons for the attack.” Robbie paused for a moment. “I think they have every intention of blowing the reactor and this is very very bad,” he understated.

“How bad?” asked Julie, in no way attempting to mask her hatred of nuclear power. She’d always had an axe to grind when it came to the nuclear industry; it was just too dangerous and misunderstood in her opinion.

“If the outer shield protecting the reactor is destroyed, a cloud of radioactive material will be released into the atmosphere.” Robbie presented a detailed simulation on the screen. It showed the prevailing wind which was blowing force four from the south-west. The area of red expanded and moved rapidly towards the north-east, covering Liverpool within one hour, then Manchester within two and expanding to cover the entire northern half of England within a day.

“It will be impossible to contain the meltdown and radioisotopes from the molten core will leach into the sea, destroying life in the Channel and as far as the coast of Ireland. Millions will die, and the land will be uninhabitable for centuries,” added Robbie.

The screen changed to forward view and it was obvious from the water rushing past the ship that they were already heading out to sea. Once clear of the land and well over the horizon, Robbie took them into space and moved over the position of the power plant.

A soft beeping sound emanating from George’s computer brought him scurrying across the room from the water cooler, spilling his beverage as he went. He tapped a couple of keys and the screen zoomed in on a position, ten miles off the Cornish coast. He replayed the recording, saw a one-second-long trace and clipped it to that position. “Yeeees!” he said under his breath, “Got you!” He cross-checked it with the trace from the other day and was just about to run into Doctor Branith’s office and confront him with the glorious revelation, when the computer beeped again. He ran the same checks on the second trace and then knocked his chair over in his rush to convey the good news to his boss and mentor.

Doctor Branith thought for a moment that his assistant had gone completely mad but sauntered over to his workstation nonetheless. George wasn’t used to seeing Doctor Branith quite so down in the dumps. His head was hung low and his feet shuffled along like someone who was on the verge of giving up. As George showed him the radar contacts and compared them with the one from the Atlantic Ocean, Doctor Branith’s eyes began to bulge and his lower jaw dropped. Finally, he’s joining the party, thought George.

“It’s the ship!” exclaimed George, prodding the screen with a very determined finger. “It left the Earth and re-entered a few seconds later, here.” He was excitedly tapping the keyboard and the screen changed to a map showing part of the coast of North Wales. He again jabbed the screen with his finger.

“The new nuclear power station at Holywell.” he said. “They disappeared from the radar right on top of it.”

Doctor Branith thought about it for a few seconds and arrived at the conclusion that if there was ever going to be a reason to blow a large amount of their budget on a helicopter flight, now was the time. He called the pilot and owner of Frazer’s Helicopter Charter based just outside of Welwyn Garden City and was relieved to hear that due to

necessary maintenance which was now completed, the chopper was free for the rest of the day. Forty-five minutes later they were flying north-west towards Liverpool.

To the gathered mass of troops surrounding the power station, the small black craft appeared in a flash, hovering about five metres from the top of the building. A general What the ...? murmured around the ranks as Corporal Jones ordered them to hold their fire. He'd never seen anything like this before. Was it an experimental craft that they were testing out or were his initial intuitions correct? He put all thoughts of little green men out of his head as he ordered the men to begin surrounding the building.

Robbie used the cameras inside the power plant to locate the hostages. They were safe for now, but it would be all too easy for one of the terrorists to empty a magazine into the room. They would have to play it really cool to avoid alerting them to their presence. A raiding party of nano-drones entered the building through a ventilation shaft on the roof and flew around the place disabling the electronic detonators that would activate the explosives. That was one minor problem dealt with. Robbie had planned to matter transform through the roof of the reactor room and land on the floor, so that the crew, including Roberta, could leave the ship and go in search of the terrorists. But as the ship entered the cavernous space, he realised that the matter transform bubble would encroach on the central containment shell and this would not work out well for anyone within a few hundred metres of the building. So, he had to stop his descent with half the ship inside the roof and half of it outside.

Oli was shocked to see Ed and Julie relishing the thought of going in there and kicking some butt, obviously using the impenetrable force field of the Go-ring to assist them. He on the other hand deplored any kind of violence and was seriously doubting whether he had it in him to harm anyone. Not even an evil terrorist who had thought nothing about killing millions of people. He disappeared into Oli world for a while, trying to convince himself that these people were just like the Throgloids and should be dealt with in a similar manner. At least the Throgloids had the excuse that they were nasty, horrible, violent thugs; these idiots were blaming their actions on a non-existent mythical being. Julie took him by his free hand and led him to the cargo bay. His other hand was furiously rubbing his forehead, as it so often did when his mind was overloading with tortuous conundrums. Then he remembered how the drone had flown around the bridge on Cranus, killing several Throgloids in the space of one or two seconds with a single blow to each of their torsos. Surely a few humans with guns wouldn't present a problem. And with this thought he immediately started to feel more relaxed about the whole situation. Robbie was planning to send in the blank drone but figured that might scare the bejeezus out of the hostages, so Roberta slowly began to form from the pile of nano-drones that had appeared.

Robbie explained the predicament. They were about thirty metres from the floor and would have to jump. As he was talking, a four square-metre section of the cargo bay's floor directly beneath their feet just disappeared, leaving them gawking down at the floor of the reactor room thirty metres below. As one, they leapt backwards to the remaining surround of floor to see Roberta floating in mid-air over the gaping hole.

"Force field," stated Robbie, rather matter-of-factly. "You can walk on it without falling through."

"Bit of warning next time maybe." Julie rasped, still catching her breath from the fright. They tentatively stepped onto the invisible force field wondering what other surprises Robbie had in store for them. If he'd been in a really mischievous mood, he would have just cut the force field and let them drop, safe in the knowledge that the Go-rings would slow their descent in the final few metres and lower them safely to the floor; but he thought it prudent to check first that they had actually engaged them. Once they confirmed that the Go-rings were

operational, he warned them about the impending drop and asked if they would kindly refrain from screaming as this would alert the bad guys to their presence.

They were all ready, knees bent, and Robbie counted down from three ... two ... one ...

When the force field disengaged, the sensation was one of being dropped from a great height, probably because they had just been dropped from a great height. The floor came rushing towards them and they all cringed without making a sound. But five metres from an impact which would have almost certainly resulted in many weeks where surfing was not an option, they suddenly decelerated and their feet touched down with no more of a bump than if they'd just stepped off a bus. The Go-rings had sensed the danger and at the last second extended the force field to cushion their fall. Beaming smiles appeared on all their faces, except Roberta who had instantaneously disintegrated into her component parts of millions of nano-drones the second that she left the ship. The crew all looked horrified at the spreading black mist on the floor.

“What happened to Roberta?” whispered Oli.

“It would appear, that for some reason, a completely unfathomable reason I might add, the drones are unable to form any cohesive form.” said Robbie, sounding, for the first time that Oli had ever heard, confused. The pile of drones attempted several more times to form a humanoid shape, but couldn't manage more than a non-descript lump that lasted just a few seconds before falling apart.

“We'll have to examine that later.” said Robbie. “In the meantime, I'm going to get a few of the drones to plug up the barrels of the terrorists' guns. We can't have them shooting up all the controls to the reactor, can we?”

Naeem was preparing himself for his journey; the reactor was almost critical, and a dissonance of alarms was sounding throughout the complex. The five men gathered together and hugged each other. Naeem had the remote control to detonate the explosives in his hand and his finger was hovering over the button. The prisoners, who were huddled together in their room, heard the terrorists shout something in unison, ending with the all too familiar refrain about a bar or something. The sudden realisation that they were about to die dawned on the faces of at least half of them, mainly the men, who spent their evenings wading through the endless examples of madness that haunt the internet. Then, as they were about to leap to their feet and make one last and completely futile scurry for freedom, a new and more home-grown sounding voice interposed above the ludicrous ranting of the four terrorists.

“Ah ... I wouldn't bother with that if I were you.”

Naeem and the other men spun round to see the three youths standing in the doorway to the control room.

Oli continued; “I mean, do it if you want; it won't work anyway. Probably best if you just give yourselves up and forget about this whole stupid idea. I mean ... you couldn't really kill millions of people, could you?”

Julie smiled and gently shook her head at Oli's wonderful naivety.

Naeem lifted the remote control and very resolutely, staring straight into Oli's eyes with one corner of his mouth curled into his best attempt at a grin, pressed the button. When he realised that he was still very much a member of this hugely flawed race called humanity and wasn't being honoured in heaven by dozens of naked men, he pressed it again and again. When this failed to elicit the desired response, he threw the detonator across the room and unslung the assault rifle from his shoulder. In one movement, he brought it round to bear on Oli's head and pressed the trigger.

Well that's two questions answered in the space of a few seconds, thought Oli. He obviously would quite easily be prepared to kill millions of people, and if you plug the end of a gun, it doesn't explode. The others brought their weapons round to aim at the crew and

pulled their triggers. Every gun emitted a muffled thud followed by a small amount of smoke from the barrel and the chamber. They were twitching the triggers like world-class pinball players but to no avail; the guns were dead.

The sirens and flashing lights emitting from the control panels were slowly subsiding as the nano-drones entered the machinery and put right everything that the terrorists had sabotaged. As Naeem saw his work going to waste, a look of intense anger appeared on his face. Oli's eyes widened; he'd never seen this look on a person before. His old neighbour's savage dog called Fang could look pretty fearful, but even it would have backed down if confronted by this wild, bestial creature. The only thing missing from the picture were two jets of steam emitting from the man's ears. He was Tonto; he brought a new definition to the phrase lost it. Oli wasn't even sure if the Go-ring would suffice to ward off this savage lunatic.

Naeem reached behind his back and pulled out a knife the size of Edinburgh from the back of his belt and, wailing like a banshee, charged towards Oli. He covered the length of the control room in less time than it took Oli to swallow the massive amount of goo that had collected in the back of his throat, and before the others could even contemplate reacting, he lunged towards Oli's neck with the blade.

Why wasn't this kid trying to jump out of the way or even putting his hands up to defend himself? I will kill these three and then go and set off the explosives by hand. I will not be denied his passage to eternity, thought Naeem, as his legs launched him through the stale air.

He'd already planned the attack in his mind. He would spear the first one, landing on top of him and breaking him as he fell, then kick the legs from under the other two and finish them off as they floundered on the floor. These weren't combat-trained soldiers; they were kids and Western kids at that; weak with the over-indulging apathy of their society's ills. His hand-to-hand combat training had produced a lethal killing machine and when combined with his psychotic lack of respect for all life, formulated a monster that even his accomplices feared.

Oli had more faith in the Go-ring than he'd had when confronting Grrghracksh on the Throgloid ship, but even so the look on Naeem's face was one to inspire doubt in even the most resilient defence system. But come the moment of contact, he had a ringside seat to witness Naeem's features change from psychotic rage to unmitigated shock in the blink of an eye. Naeem had put so much weight behind the strike that the knife snapped where the blade met the hilt, as it contacted Oli's neck, and his body careened into the youth. But instead of collapsing under the force of the onslaught, the youth remained upright and Naeem's head collided with what felt like a brick wall. The last thought to traverse the vacuum of his head before the stars appeared, followed immediately afterwards by a complete blank, was ungh?

The other three men watched their leader fall and remain motionless on the floor and two of them dropped their guns and charged the crew, screaming a savage battle cry. The fourth man, Aatif, remained calm and walked towards the room which contained the hostages. He drew a long knife from his belt, although it wasn't quite as long as Naeem's, but that was a completely separate story, which were it to be told, would enter the world of cold desert nights and secret liaisons behind the camel enclosure.

As he walked, he watched his colleagues attempt to run down the three youths. He'd trained with Naeem and they were as close to being friends as two complete psychopaths could ever hope to be. He'd been charged down by Naeem several times when they were practising defence moves in the dusty training ground, and on one occasion Naeem had knocked him about five metres backwards, cracked three of his ribs and ruined a perfectly good jacket. There was no way that that weak-looking youth, who was considerably smaller and less well built than he was, could have stood up to the full force of a flying angry

Naeem. There was obviously some demon at work here. This would be confirmed to him during the following few minutes.

Oli had just let his assailant bounce off him and crash to the floor, but Ed and Julie, invigorated by Oli's fortitude, figured they'd put a bit more effort into it. Ed waited until the man was almost upon him and then raised his right arm and formed a fist, pointing at the man's nose. He didn't punch him; he wasn't even sure what the accepted technique was for instigating a punch. He just let the idiot run straight into his fist and then fall silently to the floor, then turned his fist towards his own face and stared at it with disbelieving eyes.

Julie on the other hand, had concocted somewhat more elaborate actions in her mind. Several years before, when she was at school, she had attended karate classes. She was never particularly accomplished at it, but had achieved the grade of purple belt with a white stripe, which meant that she could perform the necessary katas, but presented with a good old-fashioned punch up, she probably would have been less than useful. It hadn't even crossed her mind for the last five years to resurrect her substandard self-defence moves, but as she watched the crazy man approach, safe in the knowledge that the ring would protect her, she launched a spinning round-house kick at his head; a move that she had failed to achieve to any acceptable standard, even at the peak of her training.

Well initially, the intention had been to aim for his head but due to several years of partying accompanied by the fact that she wasn't as supple as she had been back then, her leg wouldn't reach any higher than his chest. It was a serious case of ambition being thwarted by lack of ability. Half-way through the spin, her leg started to rise, and she became aware of her shortcomings. The strain on her muscles that she hadn't used, for so many years was obvious, until in a split second the ring also picked up on the deficiency and took over. Ed and Oli watched in awe as she spun through the air, completely leaving the ground, struck the head of the terrorist and continued to spin a further three hundred and sixty degrees without her feet touching the floor. Following some improbable airtime, she landed square on the floor in time to watch the hapless fool skid across the control room and impact like a rag doll against the opposite wall. Before anyone could even question the inconsistency of the scene that was unfolding before them, she leapt through the air clearing at least four metres with one bound, landing in a crouched position at the side of the fallen terrorist. She reached down and pulled the quivering wreck towards her by the scruff of his neck and laid him out with a single decisive blow to his extremely confused head.

"Woa ... easy tiger," said Oli, as he and Ed sheepishly took one step further away from Julie, whose look of shock rapidly turned into one of elation as she gently lowered the unconscious man to the floor.

"You'd never guess her father was a lay-preacher." whispered Ed, much to the amusement of Oli.

"Did you see that?" she asked, pointing at the crumpled heap at her feet; "Did ... you ... see ... that?" She firmly reiterated every word, whilst looking at Oli and pointing towards the unconscious man. But Oli was preoccupied with the final terrorist, who was entering the hostage's room with a huge knife—although plainly not as huge as Naeem's—in his hands. Before Oli could react in any way, the man had grabbed a young woman from the floor, spun her around to stand in the doorway facing Oli and from his cowardly position behind her, had placed the knife against her throat.

"I don't know what kind of magic you people are using," he said, tightening the grip on his knife so that the woman gasped in terror as she felt the blade press against her soft skin, "but I'm guessing that you won't want any harm to come to this innocent woman."

Oli held out his hands in submission. "Look, can't you see it's over?" He tentatively took one step forward but stopped as he saw the blade push further into the woman's neck. "You can't win; it's over. Do you really think that you're going to achieve

anything by killing an innocent woman?" The very thought that someone, in this day and age could perform such an act in the name of some ancient superstition was totally beyond Oli. But even so, he began to regret saying anything as Aatif pulled the knife inwards, shouted something incomprehensible about a bar and drew the blade across the woman's neck. He pushed her forward to cries of horror emanating from the room, and reached in for another hapless victim. As he swung her round to face the youths he had to check that he wasn't imagining things. The woman whose neck he had almost certainly just sliced open was stood in front of him rubbing her unmarked flesh in disbelief and the three youths were walking towards him calmly, grinning like Persian cats. He drew the knife across the second woman's throat and let her go, expecting her to fall to the ground, but she also just stood there in front of him, frantically rubbing her neck and inspecting her hands for signs of blood.

Whereas the first woman had looked terrified and confused, this woman, who unknown to Aatif was an amateur boxer, conveyed a somewhat different demeanour. Mary Anne, or Maizey to her friends, was not only a nuclear scientist with several published papers to her name, but also as Ed had already noted a tall, leggy brunette with a figure to die for. Unfortunately for poor old Aatif, as though his day could not have got any worse, she had recently won the Manchester Metropolitan All Women's Boxing title. She launched an assault of punches to his head that caused Aatif to double over and followed them up with a kick that wasn't strictly speaking Queensbury Rules, aiming it to ensure that his line of idiotic fanaticism would end with him. Julie applauded her from the side lines. "Go girl, go!" she shouted, while jumping for joy. As Aatif rolled around on the floor nursing his bread basket, Maizey shouted at the top of her lungs, "what sort of rubbish terrorist carries a fake knife."

She kicked his weapon away and it skidded across the floor making a loud metallic sound and embedded itself in the wooden leg of a table. Maizey gasped and began checking her neck once more.

"It's OK." said Julie, rushing over to Maizey with her arms open wide. "You're fine. There's not even a scratch on you."

"But how? I felt the knife move across my throat. I thought I was dead. Why am I still here?"

Julie gave her a big Julie hug and Maizey broke down in tears, which miraculously transformed within a few seconds into anger, and she turned around and added another kick to Aatif's woes.

All the systems in the control room were coming back on line and as the reactor cooled, all but a few of the alarms had ceased. The engineers came running out of the room and instinctively scurried about the building checking on the systems for which they were individually responsible. Three of the engineers headed for the reactor room and on entering found all the holes that had been drilled into the concrete containment shield. There were wires coming from each of the holes and these led to a control box sitting on the floor. It didn't take a nuclear scientist to work out what this all meant, and without a single concern for their own well-being they began walking around the concrete structure cautiously extracting the explosives one at a time. If they were going to detonate, they would do far less damage if not confined to a narrow crevice. The engineers knew that the concrete shield was built to withstand the force of a plane crashing into it, but if explosives are confined they possess considerably more destructive power than if they were to explode in the vast open space of the reactor room. Once all the RDX had been removed and laid on the floor, the three men gathered together and agreed to let the bomb disposal experts deal with disarming it all. They were all visibly shaking and one of the men threw back his head and let out a massive breath. It was then that he spotted the underside of the ship, with its cargo bay still exposed. It looked as though something had melted its way through the roof but stopped half-way.

“Guys,” he said, with a strained voice as his neck stretched to its full extent, “what the dickens is that?”

“I have no idea,” said his bespectacled and even more geeky-looking friend. “It looks like a craft that’s crashed into the roof ... but where’s all the debris?”

They were stood with arched necks just looking at the object but offering no possible explanation, when the crew turned up. Things had been getting a bit frantic in the control room. Maizey was asking too many questions and Julie was unable to come up with any convincing reasons as to why they were all in a nuclear power station during a terrorist attack. None of the prisoners had seen the crew overpower the terrorists, so that didn’t require any explanation. Oli suggested to some of the staff that they should bundle the unconscious or incapacitated men into a secure room and lock it till the army plucked up the courage to enter the building. They said their farewells and ran to the reactor room.

“Oh ... hi,” said Oli, skidding to a halt on the polished concrete floor. Robbie had already explained how he was planning to get them back into the ship and they all lined up in front of the three engineers with their legs slightly parted and arms rigid by their sides, as though they were about to perform a tour-rep cabaret act for the men. Then without any warning, all three of them lifted off the floor and slowly floated up to the waiting ship. The three engineers followed them with their eyes, as they entered the open cargo bay, gave a little wave and disappeared behind the re-formed, jet black shell of the hull.

Robbie had sent down a few hundred thousand nano-drones to attach themselves around the crew’s bodies and by combining their minute Graviton drives that they use to move around the ship, they had enough lifting power to carry the weight of a person. But because the three engineers couldn’t see any of the microscopic nano-drones, it appeared to them as though the three youths had just floated through the air. They remained motionless, silently staring up at the underside of the ship, expecting it to disappear at any second. But it didn’t. It just sat there, and it was still sat there when the army arrived inside the building.

“Gentlemen, I think you need to clear this area while the bomb disposal engineers do their work.” An army sergeant had entered the reactor room with his gun at his shoulder ready for action. He started to repeat the request but stopped suddenly as he looked up to see what was captivating them so much. But to the sergeant, nothing looked out of place. The underside of the ship could quite easily have been a part of the roof, maybe a section of the air conditioning system that they were inspecting. He couldn’t work out what the problem was, so he moved behind the three men, shouldered his weapon and gathering up the three smaller men in his substantial reach and physically pushed them out of the room.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Oli as they entered the control room. He could see from the screen that the army were moving in. It wouldn’t be long before they assumed that the ship was part of the attack and started shooting at it.

“I’m afraid we can’t go anywhere,” said Robbie altering the screen angle to look back from the front of the ship.

The rotors of the helicopter that was perched on top of them were still spinning very slowly. Doctor Branith had seen the semi-submerged ship as they’d approached the power station. They had been warned off by a couple of army helicopters but Doctor Branith had presented his credentials over the radio and said that it was imperative that they be allowed to enter the airspace and examine the craft on the roof. Following a deal of arguing with the commanding officer, where Doctor Branith pulled as many top brass names out of the hat as he could possibly remember, they were permitted to enter.

“Can you land on top of that black shape on the roof?” asked Doctor Branith, as George gripped the edge of his seat and closed his eyes. He didn’t have a problem with flying as such, just with flying in a machine that didn’t have wings. If the engine on an aeroplane ceased working, then at least they had a small chance of survival; but helicopters just fell out

of the sky. He had studied more than a few aeronautical design papers and still didn't quite believe that these things should be permitted to get off the ground.

"I used to land a Sea King helicopter on the deck of a pitching and rolling frigate at night," said Lieutenant Julian Frazer proudly. He was ex-army, but had retained the designation Lieutenant because it was all he'd known for fifteen years and it fitted him well. The customers seemed to like it too.

"I'll take that as a yes then," replied Doctor Branith, settling back in his seat and tightening his safety belt. George tapped him on the shoulder and pressed his intercom button. "What if they decide to take off with us on top of them?" He was trying to imagine entering outer space in the back seat of a helicopter and there was no way imaginable that the outcome would have been anything other than downright disagreeable.

"I don't think that they will George. Call it a hunch, but I'm almost certain that they don't want to hurt anybody."

Lieutenant Frazer expertly hovered the Bell 206 Jet Ranger helicopter a few metres above the roof of the ship and gradually, lowering the collective, decreased the lift. The roof of the ship was slightly curved, so he had to get it perfectly in the middle or the helicopter would land at an angle causing him to potentially lose control. Luckily there was no cross-wind, which made an impossible job slightly easier. George tensed his whole body as the right landing skid touched down and immediately lifted off again then with a final and decisive move, Lieutenant Frazer cut the power and the helicopter dropped the final few centimetres onto the roof of the ship. He looked round with one eyebrow slightly raised, expecting at least some form of praise, but his two passengers were concentrating on hurriedly undoing their safety belts, collecting their meagre belongings and then fumbling with the door mechanism to get out of the helicopter. They wouldn't fully understand the complexity of the manoeuvre that he'd just pulled off anyway, he thought. He just hoped that the Go-pro video camera that he kept running constantly had filmed the complete sequence, so that he could show the boys back at the airfield. Most of his fly-boy mates were ex-military, who, like Lieutenant Frazer, had decided to retain their wings following service. The mere suggestion of a desk job sent them all into apoplectic waves of nausea.

"This is the second time that I've stood on the roof of this craft," said Doctor Branith, as he stepped out of the helicopter. "It won't get away from me this time."

As he walked to the edge, he could see that there was a half-metre-wide gap between the ship and the roof of the building running all the way round. He could clearly see into the reactor room. There was a man in a white coat kneeling, pulling something with wires attached out of the concrete. He hopped across the gap and made a complete circuit of the ship, silently patting George on the shoulder as he passed him. George knew full well that this was Doctor Branith's version of praise for finding the craft, and allowed himself a wry smile.

"Who put that there?" asked Ed, staring at the image of the helicopter.

"It would appear that our old friend Doctor Branith has been hard at work once more." Robbie changed the viewer angle to show Doctor Branith and George standing next to the ship on the roof.

"Well, why can't we just lift off and take the chopper with us?" asked Ed.

"Because for one, I can't engage the matter transform bubble with that thing in the way, so we'll leave a massive hole in the roof of the building; but the main reason is sat in the helicopter."

Robbie changed the view once more and they all saw Lieutenant Frazer sitting in the pilot's seat. He had no idea that he was sitting atop a spaceship that could lift off at any moment, and Doctor Branith had grabbed George's arm and put a finger to his lips to silence him when he had walked towards the pilot's door to tell him. If the owners of this ship did in

fact have great respect for human life, they would not lift off with the pilot still in the cockpit. Of that he was certain ... ish.

"I'm ninety per cent certain that they mean no harm," he'd whispered, by way of an explanation.

"But what if you're wrong?" replied George, jabbing a finger towards the pilot, who was busying himself running checks so that they would be ready to lift off again.

George had been documenting everything by taking hundreds of photographs from all angles when Doctor Branith called him over to the rear of the ship. He pointed down towards the reactor room and George could see that he was secretively moving his head back and forth, so as not to be spotted from below. George looked down and noticed that three more people had shown up; three young people, one of whom, even from this odd angle, matched completely the description of one of the youths who had wing-walked the stricken 747 that had nearly crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. Dishevelled hair, knee-length shorts with trainers that were half undone. The other two also seemed familiar. He lifted his camera and began snapping away, willing the three to look up so that he could record their faces; but instead, they floated off the floor and into the bottom of the craft. Doctor Branith was beyond himself when he saw this. He started prodding George and pointing at the three flying youths, making sure that George had seen them. But George was busy trying to position himself so that in the eventuality that they did look up, he would get a perfect shot of their faces. Much to his dismay, they never did.

The army bomb disposal squad had moved in and were busy defusing the explosives. Oli knew that the moment the room was declared safe, they would have soldiers swarming all over the roof, and Doctor Branith would once again be in possession of the greatest prize of his life.

"Hey!" he shouted, leaping out of his seat. "If the nano-drones can operate a nuclear power station from inside the control console, what's to stop them flying a helicopter?" He held out his hands looking for an answer.

"Good idea Oli," said Robbie. "That's two in one day! should I contact a physician?"

"Robbie ..." Oli paused for a second. "Have you been linking up with Ed a little too much? Because you're starting to sound like him. I think one sarcastic fool is more than enough for a small spaceship ... hmmm?"

Robbie sent a few hundred thousand nano-drones out through a hairline opening underneath the ship and they invisibly converged on the helicopter from all sides. If Doctor Branith had been examining the hull of the ship with one of his giant magnifying glasses, he might have just been able to make out a fine mist drifting along it; but the drones were spread out, making them invisible to the naked eye. They entered the helicopter and accessed the controls. Lieutenant Frazer was tapping one of the dials to check the oil pressure when he noticed that the rotors began turning. The engine started to wane and all the instruments in front of him sparked into life.

"What the?"

"Lieutenant! What are you doing?" demanded Doctor Branith. He was standing directly in front of the cockpit, waving his arms furiously to attract the pilot's attention.

"I'm not doing it!" shouted Lieutenant Frazer over the increasing wane of the engine. He held out his hands to indicate that he wasn't touching any of the controls, but then began flicking switches and turning dials in an attempt to shut down the engine ... but nothing was working.

"I'd be leaping out of that helicopter by now." said Ed, shaking his head, as they all watched the pilot struggling to take control of his machine.

Lieutenant Frazer looked in horror at the controls, realising that the rotors had reached sufficient revolutions to allow the aircraft to take off. It might be able to start up by itself but there's no way that it can take off, thought the confused Lieutenant as the power increased and the helicopter lifted smoothly off the deck. He fought with the flight controls to no avail. They all moved freely but had no effect on the helicopter. He struggled to regain control for about ten minutes as he was transported across the English countryside, then gave up. It was obvious that somehow the helicopter was taking him back to base and it was flying perfectly well, so he sat back, lit a fat Cuban cigar and enjoyed the ride. He made sure that the camera was recording the whole thing, so that if the worst did happen, at least there might be some proof that his piloting skills were not to blame. He couldn't face the thought that he would be remembered as a bad pilot. He'd flown sorties in Iraq, brushed the jungle canopy in Burma and dumped a damaged chopper onto the rear deck of a destroyer without instruments in a force seven wind, but this was definitely the weirdest occurrence he'd ever experienced. He sat back, took a big draw on his cigar and let his chopper fly itself.

The crew had cheered as the helicopter lifted off, but the cheer only lasted a couple of seconds before they were once again in a pickle. The second that the helicopter had left, Doctor Branith threw himself across the gap between the ship and the roof and landed splayed across the top of the ship. George shouted at him to get off, but he was determined not to allow his trophy to abscond from his clutches for a second time. As they were all deciding what to do about their unwanted guest, Oli noticed that two army helicopters were now hovering overhead and about a dozen commandos were rappelling down to the roof.

"We've gotta go now Robbie," he said, "or we'll be trapped again."

"OK, hold on Doctor." said Robbie, as the screen shimmered with the matter transform bubble. The ship slowly lifted, and George watched with horror as the roof reformed under it and it lifted off with his boss still splayed across the top. He reached out trying to grab hold of the side of the ship but found nothing that offered even the slightest grip on the perfectly smooth surface.

The ship threaded its way through the descending lines of commandos and very slowly moved away from the building. Finding nothing to hold onto, Doctor Branith remained completely flat and waited for the ship to fly off into space. Maybe they hadn't seen him, so he started banging on the hull; but the ship continued to move. After a short while he started wondering why they hadn't shot off into space. After all, that was their usual form. They seemed to be flying below the roof of the building now and heading towards the car park. The ship came in low over the cars, heading for the collection of army vehicles that were gathered on the grass. They flew over several groups of soldiers, who all obeyed orders and resisted the temptation to shoot at the alien ship.

"Just as well they're British soldiers," said Oli, "the yanks would be unloading everything they had at us right now."

Robbie placed the edge of the ship above one of the army transport lorries, so that the underside was a couple of metres above the canvas roof, and slowly rolled the ship to the right. Doctor Branith realised what they were trying to do, and his arms and legs started floundering across the glassy smooth surface of the ship. But once the ship had rolled to a point that he began to slide, there was nothing the hapless doctor could do. He slid off the ship and landed softly, if not rather gracelessly, on the canvas roof precisely between two of the metal roof supports.

"Shot!" said Ed, impressed that Robbie had rolled the doctor into the middle of the canvas avoiding the hard metal supports. Doctor Branith leapt to his feet immediately and started trying to jump back onto the ship, but there was nothing to grip on to and he cursed as the ship once again literally slid from his grasp and in the blink of an eye, disappeared.

“Well I don’t know about you lot,” said Oli as they floated silently, ten thousand kilometres above the Earth, “but I reckon that saving millions of lives and preventing the North of England from becoming uninhabitable for decades deserves a celebration.”

They were all absolutely in agreement until Robbie pointed out that they had to meet Sara in Richmond Park that evening and they also had the on-going problem of the missing crew member to resolve.

“OK.” said Oli, obviously trying to work out a way that they could squeeze in a quick celebration. “We can’t land in London until its dark, can we? And we can’t do anything about Jay from up here, sooooo ...”

“I know this fantastic bar in Phuket,” offered Julie. Her father had paid for her to take a year out, travelling around South East Asia when she finished school. He figured that if she got the travel bug out of her system, she would be happy spending four years at university studying to become a lawyer. She had attained the necessary grades to secure her place but the thought of wasting another four years learning how to become a liar, really didn’t appeal to her free spirit. Why would she want to spend four years of valuable living time learning to do something in which she had never even had the slightest interest and then at the end, owe about thirty thousand quid to the government? Unfortunately for her father, the year out had merely reinforced the view that she was finished with education and had absolutely no desire to allow her father to live his life vicariously through her. Although he had been successful in his career as a car salesman, he made no secret of the fact that if his parents had been able to offer him the chances that were now being offered to Julie, he would have been the greatest lawyer that the country had ever known. In her opinion, lawyers were huddled together, gasping for air in the same dark pit as the bankers.

She explained to Robbie where the bar was located and five minutes later, Oli, Ed and Julie were walking out of the sea behind a large rock. Robbie had wanted to accompany them, but as soon as Roberta left the confines of the ship she disintegrated again. It was night time in Phuket and they could hear the chill-out music wafting across the sand. The bar, about one hundred metres away, appeared to be gently swaying as the coloured lights smoothly morphed with each other and when they disengaged the Go-rings they felt the warm tropical air that was blowing lightly off the land as it cooled down after the day’s baking.

“Now that’s a bar!” said Oli, whose experience of bars was limited to London and Cornwall, where it was highly unlikely that you would ever find swaying palm trees and a breeze so warm that it caressed the marrow within your bones. The bar was surprisingly quiet. There were just a few groups of travelling types occupying three wicker tables and chairs along the beach.

Julie looked at Oli and the bar’s clientele and remarked at how well Oli blended in.

While they were enjoying a round of remarkably potent cocktails as the warm Andaman Sea gently caressing their bare feet, a somewhat irate Doctor Branith and George were interviewing Maizey and the other scientists. There was no doubt that these were the same young people that had prevented the jumbo jet from crashing. He phoned the pilot to get him to return and pick them up, but he wasn’t answering his phone, so Doctor Branith and George were forced to take a taxi to the train station on the first leg of their long journey home.

Lieutenant Frazer’s helicopter had performed a text-book landing back at the aerodrome. He’d immediately given the vehicle a thorough going over then started the motor and realised that he had regained full control. He would obviously have to explain to Doctor Branith what had happened, but he didn’t really see any good reason for filing an official report. After all, the CAA responded quite harshly to insanity in helicopter pilots.

“That thing with the knives?” Oli asked, as he sipped a cocktail that looked more like the hanging gardens of Babylon than a beverage. “That was the drones wasn’t it?”

“Yes of course.” said Robbie, “They formed a barrier between the knife and the ladies’ necks.”

“So why do you think that the drones can’t form a solid shape outside the ship?” asked Julie, taking a short break from drawing the nectar-like substance through her straw.

“That, I’m afraid is a complete mystery.” said Robbie. “One that I am working on solving as we speak.”

HOT COMMANDER

Arnus and his parents remained in the storm cellar long after the raucous clamour from above had ceased. Tibras wanted to be certain that their undesirable house guest had departed, never to return. The house was enveloped in the other-worldly purple hue of dusk when they crept up the stairs, Tibras leading the way with his hog gun thrust out in front of him. His old, twin shot hog gun would certainly stop most beasts of the forest with just one barrel, but he wasn't totally convinced of its potential effectiveness against that hideous monster.

The disturbance had ceased for a while as Grrghracksh tucked into his meal, but shortly afterwards he came back into the house and started rifling through their belongings searching for a map or any other useful objects. He had to find Torian and the launch centre for the rocket or he could envisage himself being stranded on this pointless rock for a very long time. In one of the rooms upstairs, he found shelves full of books and in his frustration at trying to grip the tiny tomes with his oafish gloved hands he had swept them all onto the floor. Arnus' room turned out to contain a treasure trove of information. He found a book with a map of the entire moon, with separate pages for detailed plans of towns. There were also dozens of reference books concerning the star system in which they lived. He began flicking through the pages of one of these books that contained pictures of the star constellations and as he surveyed the incomprehensible diagrams, he cursed himself. If only he understood stellar navigation, he would probably have been able to deduce from these pictures where in the name of Slograck the Slayer he was. He took one of the books with him, hoping that it may yet prove to be useful.

Despite his intense concentration, Grrghracksh lost his footing again on the way down the ridiculously narrow stairs. This time his size twenty feet, encased in his rigid battle boots, slid out from under him and he tobogganed down the wooden staircase on his ample rear, taking out the entire row of banisters on his way down. One of the sections of wood, split in two by his foot, formed a sharp stabbing implement and he watched in slow-motion horror as it tipped over and pointed directly at his groin. He was already on top of it before he could react, but his armoured suit deflected it away harmlessly. The modern Throgloid battle suits were so well designed that the wearers would often forget that they were wearing them. They could stop most projectile weapons, except for the armour-piercing variety, and they would offer a certain amount of protection against low energy beam weapons. When they had discovered the Annenian pulse rifles on Cranus, he'd pressed one of his crew to stand at the far end of the cargo bay to see how well the suit performed against one of these new weapons. Lower ranking Throgloids were well aware that their time to die could come at any moment at the caprice of their commanding officer. The only options open to them on such an occasion would be to hide, certain in the knowledge that they would be found and made to suffer an even shoddier end than originally intended, or they could attempt to fight back in pursuit of glory and instant promotion. Where Grrghracksh' command was concerned, the outcome was usually identical whichever path the hapless minions chose to pursue. The resolution to the query about the new weapon had been swift, decisive ... and messy.

Grrghracksh came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs with both feet embedded in the remains of the wall opposite. He picked up the two books that were lying face down in the rubble, dusted himself off and turned around to kick the stupid stairs, sending more shards of timber scuttling across the floor. Tibras held Malrey and Arnus close to him, attempting to calm them and prevent any inconvenient outbursts. It sounded as though the monster was tearing up their house piece by piece. "But rather the house than the occupants," thought Tibras.

Grrghracksh went outside to get his bearings. Sitting on the edge of the veranda, he began flicking through the pages of the map book, searching for something recognisable. He surveyed the visible area around the house for obvious landmarks and picked out the mountain range in the distance with the forest rolling like a wooden glacier down to the river. Eventually, after scrutinising almost half of the book, he found a match. He was about three hundred kilometres from the capital city, in a region called Kertia. They had no obvious form of transport at this dwelling, so he would have to run. He figured that in this low gravity he could cover the distance in about two and a half days, so he stuffed some meat in his back pack with the two books, ran down to the river to fill his drinking vessel and headed north-east.

As Tibras entered the hallway from the cupboard under the stairs, he had to force the door open through the debris from the broken wall. He began to speculate as to what the creature was searching for that had led it to remove the stair rail and half of the wall at the bottom. But it was nothing that couldn't be fixed, so he pressed on into the kitchen. Arnus and his mother were waiting for Tibras to give them the all clear at the top of the cellar stairs, but Arnus couldn't resist poking his head out to have a look. His father angrily gesticulated for him to move back under the stairs. But once Tibras was certain that the creature was no longer there, he allowed Arnus and Malrey to leave their hiding place. Malrey put her hand to her mouth and gasped at every piece of damage. She wasn't obsessively house proud, but she liked to keep a tidy place and the thought of that giant beast tearing through her possessions was a little too much for her to handle. Arnus noticed that she was just staring at the mess with an increasing level of fluid glazing across her eyes, so he went to her and gave her a big hug.

"Don't worry Mum, we'll have this cleared up in no time." She forced a smile for her boy through the tears.

Arnus walked out onto the veranda, where he could see his father standing motionless staring at the remains of the water hog. The head and entrails were still burning on the fire, but most of the one hundred kilo body was nowhere to be seen.

"How could one creature have eaten an entire water hog?" asked Arnus, as he scoured the garden for the remaining body parts.

"I guess he was hungry," replied Tibras, placing his arm around his son. He pulled his comms-pad out of his pocket and dialled the number for the security force. He'd tried several times before to call them, but there was no signal in the basement. He made a mental note to install a static comms pad in the cellar. He'd managed to muddle through life without one of these infernal mobile devices for years whilst everyone else was going crazy for them, but he had finally succumbed following an incident, in which he had broken his leg whilst out on a hunting trip, deep in the middle of the forest. He was on his own and had jumped across a narrow stream that on any other day of the week he could have cleared easily with plenty in reserve, but this time he had landed on an uneven piece of earth on the other bank, twisted his ankle and smacked his leg into a rock that was perfectly positioned for the task of snapping his bone. He'd lain there for half the day and into the night before a rescue party had found him after being alerted by Malrey. She insisted that if he was going to continue venturing deep into the forest, he would have to take a comms-pad with him. Unfortunately, once he had one, he found it almost impossible to exist without it and that was the trap that he'd been trying to avoid for all those years.

He explained the situation to the security service and they insisted that it was probably a large Mountain Groaff that had ventured out of its territory. They'd received reports that some of the three-metre tall creatures had been spotted in the lowlands, probably because of the unusually cold winter that was just about releasing its grip from the high

pastures. But it was unusual for one to become aggressive; they usually just sat there picking their ears and farting.

“This was no Mountain Groaff!” Tibras forcefully stated, without raising his voice too much. He always found that the security service personnel, who weren’t exactly gleaned from the upper echelons of society, reacted badly to raised voices. It was more effective to treat them with respect. So, he collected his thoughts and continued with a measured tone.

“This was an armour-clad, weapon-carrying monster that fell from the sky in a space craft and ate an entire water hog for breakfast. Now get someone out here immediately ... and make sure they’re armed!”

Tibras animatedly pressed the button to end the call and calmly walked back into the house to begin work on the clean-up. Arnus smiled to himself. His dad wasn’t very good at dealing with fools, which was partly why he had moved so far away from civilization. His time in the city had been served, which was where he’d met Malrey. She had come into the city to sign some paperwork when her mother had died. She was an only child, so had inherited the house and the sizeable plot of land around it and had every intention of remaining there. Tibras fell for her immediately and accepted the invitation to visit her in the country.

As he surveyed the damage, he remembered the first time he had seen the little house with the river winding its way down to the lake. He never returned to his job in the city. He had found his Nirvana and intended to cling to it. He knew that whoever replaced him at the law firm would be granted his apartment as part of the job, and they were welcome to his limited possessions. He owned nothing that would be of any use out here anyway. It was a fresh start and the move that he’d been waiting for all his life. He’d never really settled in the city. It just felt wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger on either the reason or the solution. As it transpired, he was a country boy through and through. Putting him in the middle of a city was like putting a bird in a cage.

Tibras and Arnus were busy clearing the smashed pieces of wood and piling them onto the ready-made fire when a security hovercraft swooped low over the trees behind the house and landed far enough away from the building for the four engine pods not to kick up any of the fire. Tibras was impressed that the pilot had spotted the fire and refrained from blasting the red-hot embers over the house. The craft settled onto its three feet and a door opened upwards on either side of the craft, while three steps unfolded from the fuselage allowing the two security officers to climb down from the cockpit. Arnus ran down to greet them as the four magnetic inversion motors ceased their whining. He’d never seen a hovercraft up close and was more than a little excited by the prospect of being able to touch one and look inside the engines. The two officers were dressed in regulation green and grey uniforms and as Arnus approached them, they removed their green helmets and placed them on the side of the craft.

“Hey there young fellow,” said one of the officers, as Arnus skidded to a stop, “Where’s this monster then?” They exchanged knowing glances and passed each other a sarcastic smile.

“It’s gone, but I can show you where it’s spaceship crashed,” said Arnus, pointing at the forest whilst looking straight past them at the hovercraft.

“Is that your father up at the house?”

“Yes,” answered Arnus, without taking his eyes off the hovercraft.

“Well, we’ll go and have a word with him first,” said the officer, noticing Arnus’ fixation on the hovercraft. He pulled a device out of his pocket, pressed a button and the gull-wing doors to the hovercraft made a soft hissing noise as they closed. As the two officers walked up the shallow hill to the house, Arnus walked around the sleek-looking machine, running his hand over the bodywork. He stooped to look inside one of the vertical-thrust

engines. He understood the theory of how they worked, but had never seen one apart from in a book.

The electromagnetic engines worked on Phorissi because of the high concentration of iron in the crust of the moon. They created a cushion of repulsion that supported the vehicle. Increase the power and the object was pushed further away from the land; tilt the fully independent engines in any direction and the movement could be controlled. The technology had only been in existence for fifty Phorissian years, and in the early days they had attempted to boost the power to allow larger craft to fly higher and higher. Unfortunately, they discovered to the detriment of an entire town that if the field intensity was increased beyond a certain point, it would create an area of intense flux between the craft and the ground. The occupants of the town knew nothing about it as the one-hundred-metre-long cruiser passed over them on its maiden voyage. Anything that wasn't part of the moon was ripped from the ground and decimated inside what was later described as, an electromagnetic blending machine. A fifty-metre-wide path was cut through the town and three thousand seven hundred Phorissians lost their lives.

But the new generations of engines worked perfectly well, and the only accidents were usually caused by careless driving or attempting to operate one of the craft after consuming a little too much Neurobomb, a powerful cocktail of grain spirit and fermented fruit.

Arnus reached the far side of the craft facing away from the two officers, and after taking a quick peek to check that they were still talking to his father he climbed the three steps and looked inside the cockpit. His eyes opened wide as he took in the array of hi-tech equipment. The pilot sat next to the passenger, but all the controls were situated on the pilot's side. Arnus just imagined being in the pilot's seat, skimming the ground at close to two hundred kilometres per hour. One of his school friends was bragging that he was getting a hoverbike for his fifteenth birthday, but his parents were rich beyond belief. Arnus knew that if he was ever going to have his own hovercraft, he was going to have to work for it. As he peered through the cockpit, he noticed that the two officers were walking back towards the craft. So, he scampered down the ladder and innocently walked around the front of the craft pretending not to notice them.

"OK," said the officer who wasn't the pilot, "I guess you'd better show us where this spaceship is." He emphasised the word spaceship and Arnus just grinned at him, knowing that they would soon be convinced once they saw the alien craft protruding from the forest floor. Unfortunately, when they arrived at the crash site, there was nothing more alien to show them than a fallen tree that had broken into pieces and a burnt hole in the ground with some charred remains of metal and wires dotted about the area.

"Spaceship!" said the pilot. "Looks more like a meteor strike to me. Now young lad, you do realise that there are laws against wasting the security services time, don't you?" He looked at his colleague for agreement and said, "But hey, at least we got a nice trip out to the countryside, didn't we?"

He ruffled Arnus' hair, not that it needed ruffling. Like all good scientists, Arnus believed that there were more important things to consider than personal appearance. There was nothing that Arnus could say that would convince them that there was an alien monster running around on Phorissi, right up to the point where shortly after leaving the house, they rounded a corner in the ravine and a ball of green light shot out from the bushes and blew them out of the sky. For a split second, just before spreading themselves across a wide area, they both thought ... "Oh, that alien".

"Maybe they'll send someone who knows what they're doing next time," said Tibras, as he watched the plumes of smoke appear over the distant trees. He put his arm around Arnus' shoulder and they went into the house for dinner.

During the next two days, they were inundated with security officers. They located the crash site and took the craft away to be analysed. On first inspection it certainly looked as though the hovercraft had been shot down. Arnus and his father were taken to Torian to be questioned by some pretty serious-looking Phorissians. They travelled in a transport hovercraft, larger than the two-seater craft used by the security service. Arnus was out of his skin with excitement as the craft lifted off and soared low over the tree tops towards the city. He'd been on a large hover-bus on a school trip, but that was nothing like being in the passenger seat of a high-performance troop carrier such as this one.

As the city came into view, he became anxious, remembering the first time that he had visited this imposing place with all the tall buildings and thousands of vehicles jostling for position. The countryside gave way to sparse collections of houses; then the houses became crammed into tighter groups and up ahead Arnus could make out the ring of tall buildings surrounding the enormous jet-black polygon lying at the centre of the city. As they made their way down the main airway, he looked down to see the crowds of people milling around like tree mites and wondered what it was, that occupied so many people all day.

They landed outside the Municipal Security Service building and were taken inside, where they sat patiently in an extremely comfortable if not slightly sparsely appointed waiting room. Arnus started flicking through some of the magazines that had been laid out on the table and couldn't believe the level of banality contained within the glossy covers. He received his copy of *Astronomers Monthly*, but that was the only magazine that ever entered their house. Why on Phorissi would anyone want to know what this personality had for dinner or who was dating whom? He flicked through the pages then placed the magazine back on the table top. Tibras gave a little pride-filled smile. He wanted his son to experience all that life had to offer and he had no desire to force all his own likes and dislikes on the boy, but on the other hand he felt that it would benefit Arnus in the long run if he learnt how to recognise complete and utter nonsense when he saw it.

After a while a tall slim lady came and asked Arnus to go with her. He looked toward Tibras who quickly confirmed with a nod of the head that he would be fine. She took him into a room on his own and Arnus soon realised that there was nothing to worry about. All the rumours that he'd heard, mainly from the usual suspects at school, about the security services were rapidly invalidated. Arnus concluded that they just wanted to find out who had killed their friends. They couldn't do enough to make him and his father comfortable and he finally found someone, in the person of Commander Jaad, who listened to his story.

Commander Shhti Jaad of the Torian Municipal Security Service shared a common interest with Arnus, namely a deep obsession with space. Commander Jaad had been an avid stargazer since childhood, but unfortunately, not having been blessed with the natural intellect of Arnus, couldn't quite make the grade to continue down the necessary paths of education that would lead to a career in the sciences. So, following a few years of hard work climbing the ranks, she had joined the department in charge of security for the space programme, situated just outside the capital city. If she wasn't going to play any part in building the ships, then she would certainly do her level best to protect them.

Two days after the hovercraft crash, she'd ordered a full-scale operation to search the land between the crash site and the city. Every hovercraft at her disposal was scouring the land, flying slowly over the forest with motion sensors pointed towards the ground. They found nothing apart from a couple of confused looking Mountain Groaffs that had strayed further from their lofty territory than ever recorded. They were darted, boxed and taken back to their home in the mountains. Commander Jaad had continued with the search, but was finally ordered from above to stop wasting service resources. She had seen the photographs that Arnus took of the creature, and unlike everyone else in her department she believed him. So, in complete defiance of her orders, she posted three hover-craft to patrol the border

between the edge of the forest and the rocket base. They were piloted by officers who were loyal to her, and they were all sworn to secrecy.

Arnus had begged her to allow him to come to the launch site, but his father was having none of it. They'd had enough contact with the big city to last a year and he had insisted that they be taken home. Arnus argued the point for a few minutes, but he knew that once his father's mind was decided, he would have more chance of shifting a sleeping Mountain Groaff, so they headed back to the country.

"This is more like it," thought Grrghracksh, in his totally concealed dug-out just inside the edge of the forest. He'd managed to avoid the primitive attempts at detection from the low-flying craft and somehow succeeded in resisting the temptation to blow a few more of them out of the sky, and that was harder than anything he'd ever imagined. He'd got so frustrated at one point that his sexual glands became inflamed to such intensity that he either had to satiate his lust for violence or for sex ... or preferably both. That was the reason for the rather confused look on the faces of the two Mountain Groaffs. They weren't the prettiest companions he'd ever met, but as he'd thought back to his first wedding night, he remembered that they were far from being the ugliest.

Now there were only three craft attempting to cover at least twenty square kilometres of scrub land. He would wait until dark and then work out a way of getting to the rocket base without attracting any attention. He could just blast them away and make a run for it, but he wasn't certain about the weaponry that these feeble creatures possessed. He didn't want to start a fire fight that would light up the night sky. This was more important than just blowing away a few inferior beings. He had to find a way back to that place called Earth and force his revenge upon the ugly creature and his revolting species. Now that he'd satiated his more basic urges, this was his singular driving force that would push him to completion or destruction.

He wondered whether the craft would have to leave to re-fuel. But after about five hours watching them trail back and forth above his head, it became obvious that they were using a fusion power cell. At the start of the fifth night of his journey, Grrghracksh saw three more hovercraft arriving from the north to replace the day shift. They would be fresh and alert he thought; now was not a good time. He hunkered down and waited until the middle of the night, when they would be tired and bored. As the previous days had passed, he'd timed the period between sunset and sunrise and had just over twelve hours before it was light again. The days on this moon were longer than he was accustomed to: an average day on Throwgus lasted twenty-seven hours, but on this tiny moon that obviously rotated at a painfully slow rate, the days lasted thirty-six hours.

He passed the next six hours timing the gaps between the patrol craft; they were fairly regular. He would have about three minutes between one leaving and another showing up either behind it or coming from the other direction. This would give him time to run about one kilometre and then cover himself before the next craft passed overhead. He was aware of their detection devices, thanks to the sensors built into his suit. With the visor lowered to cover his entire face, he could see their electronic beams moving across the ground. They were using crude infra-red motion detectors that encompassed an area of about two hundred metres all around the craft, so providing that he was motionless and completely covered over with foliage long before the next craft arrived they would be totally unaware of his presence.

He climbed one of the trees near the edge of the forest and mapped his path to the rocket launch site, taking in as many large bushes as he could find. He would use the x-ray vision on his visor to light his way. He was almost certain that they were incapable of detecting such a high frequency wavelength, but one part of him was hoping that they would spot him as he ran for cover and as they changed course to intercept, he would turn and fire a

few pulses at them and light up the sky with their puny machines. He shook his head to expel these thoughts.

“Clever ... clever ... you must be clever,” he chanted to himself as he clambered down from the tree. They were the final words of his mother just before he’d hacked her to death and eaten her, and they repeated over and over in his head until the time came for the first dash.

The craft was out of sight and he waited for the circle of infra-red light to pass by, then ran with all his might taking giant five-metre strides. He had to reach the first waypoint long before the arrival of the next craft, to allow any movement in the undergrowth to subside. He was tearing through small bushes that would continue to shake for some time after he’d passed. As he ran, he glanced over his shoulder to see the next craft approaching several hundred metres away. He located the first large bush that he had spotted from his tree-top reconnaissance position, and collecting a few scrubs as he went he dived under the low canopy and covered himself.

As he lay there listening to the increasing whine of the hovercraft’s engines, he clicked off the safety on the pulse rifle and held it in front of his prone body so that if the necessity arose he could just roll over and shoot skywards. The infra-red light illuminated the ground around him and he remained still. The craft passed directly overhead and the bush under which he was hiding shook violently as the electromagnetic cushion moved through it, but still he remained motionless. The thought passed through his battle-activated mind that he could probably jump high enough to board the vessel, kill the occupants and use the vehicle to complete his journey; but he dismissed this idea as folly. He had no idea how to operate the machine; he wasn’t even sure that he would fit inside the cockpit, so he lay there silently. Then as the red light faded, he tossed the pieces of shrub away and ran for the next point as directed by his visor.

He repeated the manoeuvre four times before he was confident that he had cleared their patrol area. He could still see the craft moving along the edge of the forest and raised himself to his full height, waving his arms high above his head just to check that they couldn’t see him. His next obstacles were the bright lights that were lighting up the area around the perimeter fence surrounding the launch complex. He could see the rocket some ten kilometres away and the only building nearby, which had to be the launch control centre, was approximately five kilometres to the left. His visor zoomed in on the perimeter giving him a flawless view of the guard towers every one-hundred metres, with guards patrolling inside the fence and search lights scanning the area outside the complex. This wasn’t going to be easy, he thought, with a drool-filled smile spreading across his face.

Commander Jaad had assumed that the creature was heading for the complex. She hadn’t determined the reason yet, but was resolute that she should act on the hunch. She’d ordered the launch security to be vigilant. They were a completely independent force from the Municipal Security Service and they were fully under her command with no interfering desk slugs to countermand her. She was now stationed in the security department of launch control and hadn’t had a good night’s sleep for two days.

Grrghracksh pulled a flat pad from the shoulder of his suit and tapped a few commands into the key pad. The sensors analysed the surroundings and his suit changed colour to match. Throgloid camouflage wasn’t their strong point, they preferred a full-frontal attack rather than creeping around in the shadows. But with the darkness of the night and the low-tech equipment that was being used against him, he blended in with the surroundings perfectly. Following thirty minutes running and occasionally diving flat on the ground when he thought that one of the distant guards might be looking his way, he was within reach of the searchlight beams. As the lights converged on his position he dropped to the ground motionless. The guards in the towers were using eye glasses with infra-red motion detectors,

so he could see where they were looking. To his enhanced view, the infra-red light was as bright as the searchlights. As he approached within a few hundred metres of the perimeter, there were only two towers that were even capable of spotting him. One of the towers contained a group of slackers that seemed to be more interested in some sort of sporting action on their viewer, so he headed for that one whilst keeping a constant watch on the other tower that seemed to contain a more astute adversary who was scanning the area at regularly-spaced intervals.

He reached the fence directly beneath the tower and whilst lying flat on the ground, pulled a flat disk from one of the pouches on his belt and attached it to a metal link about half a metre from the ground. He flicked a switch on the top of the disk and pushed himself away from the fence. The disk paused for a few seconds then created a perfectly spherical area of fragmentation a metre in diameter that unlocked all molecular bindings forming the structure of the material used in the construction of the fence. If the Throgloids had continued with their research and comprehended the reintegration of molecular structure, they would have invented a matter transform bubble, similar to the one used by the Annenians to pass through solid rock, but the satisfying act of destruction was a one-way cul-de-sac in the mind of a Throgloid.

The metre-wide hole appeared in the fence and the disk, having nothing to fasten to, fell to the ground. Grrghracksh thrust his arm forward to prevent the heavy disk from impacting the loose twigs that surrounded the fence. Unfortunately, he was too far away and the edge of the heavy Fragmentor landed square in the middle of a desiccated piece of foliage. The sharp cracking sound echoed upwards towards the towers and whilst the Phorissians who were engaged in their match heard nothing other than the cheering coming from their viewer as the sporting event concluded with a victory to their team, the alert guard picked out the almost imperceptible sound and whipped his head around towards the other tower. He grabbed hold of the search light handle and spun it on its mounting so that it lit up the base of the other tower. Commander Grrghracksh flattened himself into the dirt and lay motionless, but even with the camouflage blending him into the surrounding ground he still appeared as an extremely out of place mound comprising the unmistakable features of arms and legs.

The guard stood staring at the incongruous shape about one hundred metres away. After straining his eyes for a few seconds and coming up with no conclusive answers, he reached for the thermal imaging glasses and pointed them towards the shape. It's moving, he thought; it's the alien ... must raise the alarm ... what's that bright green light coming towards me?

The tower and the guard exploded in a green-tinged fireball and the other guards finally averted their gaze from the screen to the horrific demise of their colleague. Suddenly sirens sounded and all the search lights within range swung rapidly from their bearing out on the plain and converged on the area surrounding the destroyed tower. Pieces of burning debris were still falling from the sky as Grrghracksh scrambled through the hole in the fence and took cover beneath the tower. The fools are scanning everywhere except where I am, he thought. The search lights were dancing erratically from the base of the tower to outside of the perimeter, so he figured that whilst they were concentrating on the wrong area completely he would make a run for cover towards the distant buildings. Several guards were approaching from the left, running towards the mayhem, weapons drawn. Grrghracksh still wasn't sure what kind of fire-power they possessed, so he lay flat once more and let them pass. The final guard came level with the tower then noticed something and skidded to a halt kicking up a trail of dust. He'd spotted the perfectly disk-shaped hole in the fence and with his weapon levelled before him, he started walking directly towards Grrghracksh, who, realising in a moment of relief and almost sexual elation that it was time to start fighting,

leapt to his feet and in one fluid motion he dropped the pulse rifle, drew the Grax from his back and swung it through the air towards the guard. The guard didn't even have time to utter what the... before his head went bouncing across the ground. Grrghracksh had put so much effort into the strike that the blade continued past the guard and clean through one of the metal legs of the tower. The guards, who had long since abandoned their game, felt their platform judder slightly and ran to one side to inspect the scene below. It was their added weight above the severed leg that caused the tower to collapse, but on their way down they both saw the giant, almost transparent figure moving at high speed towards the launch complex. The other guards were too far away and too slow to react to see Grrghracksh disappearing into the dark and it took them ten minutes to locate the breach in the fence and raise the alarm, by which time Grrghracksh was stealthily moving around the outside of the building searching for an entrance.

“Order all remaining forces into the area!” instructed Commander Jaad, as she moved her finger across the electronic plan of the complex. She drew an imaginary line from the edge of the forest to the fallen towers straight to the main building. “I want every perimeter guard surrounding the launch control immediately. Lock down all access routes and lifts. This area must be secure.”

She left the security department and ran, followed by four guards, to the control centre to secure the heart of the building.

The sound of slamming steel doors and shutters resounded around the complex and the door that Grrghracksh was about to open emitted a loud clunk as it locked. He tried the handle, but it wouldn't move, so he placed the Fragmentor disk above the opening mechanism where he assumed the lock would be located, not certain whether the disk would have enough power remaining. They were usually good for two or three operations before they would need re-charging, depending on the density of the material that they were dealing with. He flicked the switch and a perfectly circular hole appeared in the door and surrounding wall. This time he caught the Fragmentor as it fell to the ground. The door swung open with a gentle prod from the barrel of his gun and he stooped to enter the building. He pulled another device from his belt and turned it on. A small screen flipped out from the side of the scanner and displayed a detailed map of his surrounding area. As he decreased the magnification, a less detailed map appeared showing hot-spots of energy. He slowly turned around and the scanner locked in on a large source of power about two hundred metres away and eighty metres underground. He pressed a few more buttons and ten, small jet-black spheres the size of golf balls flew out from a flap in the front of his suit, and hovered in front of his head. He tapped a few more keys, programming the defence drones to encircle the complex and kill anything that wasn't Throgloid. He hit the final key with great delight and the hovering drones darted off in all directions. It wasn't long before he heard the distinctive cracking sound of mini lasers taking out the enemy and he made his way towards the energy source.

There were hundreds of corridors and doors between Grrghracksh and the control room, but he had finally abandoned the necessity for stealth and began blasting his way through walls and doors to create a more direct path. The relief on his face was palpable, following three days of hiding and creeping about in bushes. Every discharge from the pulse rifle represented an offering to his ancestors by way of an apology for his un-Throgloid-like behaviour.

As he approached the lifts, the scanner displayed the power source almost directly below. He placed the scanner back in its container and leant the pulse rifle against the wall, and with one mighty swing of his arm punched a hole through the door of the lift. He pulled with most of his strength and the entire door came away from the wall and was sent spinning down the corridor. The carriage was missing, but there were several steel cables running down the centre of the shaft, so he picked up the rifle and jumped across the small gap,

grabbing hold of several cables with one hand. He locked his feet around the cables and slowly relaxed his grip to slide down the shaft. This was the most fun he'd had since coming across that infernal creature that had cost him his ship. He landed with such force on the top of the lift that he smashed straight through the feeble material and landed on his feet inside the box with pieces of shattered metal and wires hanging around him. The light was flickering as the cable connecting it to the power decided whether to continue with its function. Grrghracksh picked up a piece of the flimsy material and crumpled it in his hand as though it were a desiccated wafer biscuit. He sniggered at the feeble construction. Even toilet paper was stronger than this on Throwgus, he thought.

Shhti Jaad and the twenty-five security personnel and engineers had felt the explosions coming from above and they also heard the mighty crash as something landed inside the lift at the end of the corridor. As she stood in the doorway facing the forty-metre passage, dust began to appear from inside the lift through gaps in the top and bottom of the door. She immediately hit the panic button that would close the blast doors leading to the control room. These would have been routinely shut in the run-up to a launch to protect the engineers in case of a major malfunction. The doors were designed to withstand the resulting blast of a rocket hitting the building above. A siren sounded, and the three-metre-wide doors slowly began to close. A bit too slowly for her liking. She stood inside the control room surrounded by guards with their weapons trained on the lift doors, willing the blast doors to close. Then in a flash of green light, the lift door blasted away from the wall and careened down the corridor towards them. It ricocheted between the walls of the corridor and bounced off the outside of the blast door before finally spinning to a halt, gently rocking on the floor as the smoke gradually cleared along the length of the passage. The blast doors had just one more metre to go as Grrghracksh emerged from the smoke, walking at first and then running at full speed as he realised that the control room was about to be sealed off. The guards, seemingly un-phased by the sight of a three-metre-tall monster charging towards them, opened fire and a wide smile spread across Grrghracksh's drooling mouth as he comprehended the nature of their weapons. They were bombarding him with tiny projectiles that simply rebounded off his suit, causing no more damage than a few scratches in the outer layer. In mid-charge, he brought his rifle up to his shoulder and aimed at the creature that was obviously in charge. There was just enough space between the doors to squeeze a shot through and his finger tensed around the trigger. But as he took aim, he surveyed the area directly behind the target and saw the banks of computers and control panels. He had no intention after all this work of destroying his only way out of here, so he released the trigger and lowered the weapon, halting his charge with his big green, bloodshot eye against the remaining crack as the doors closed with a deep, resonating thud.

Commander Jaad breathed a sigh of relief as the doors finally closed. She placed a call to her boss at the MSS and informed him of the situation, resisting the temptation to ask if he was going to believe it now.

"The building is surrounded, and more troops are arriving every minute," he stated, unable to hide his embarrassment. "But every time they approach the building they are fired upon by invisible intruders using some kind of light-generating weapon. We've already lost too many people today and until we can understand what it is that we're up against, you'll just have to sit tight Commander."

He assured her that nothing on Phorissi could gain access through those doors. She resisted the obvious come-back.

Everyone in the control centre flinched as the entire room shuddered and hairline cracks appeared in the walls around the blast doors. Grrghracksh fired a few shots at the doors and realising that they were withstanding the force of the pulse rifle, he turned it up to the next setting and fired again. The blast which was contained within the narrow corridor hit

him like an attack pod and he found himself lying upside down, pressed against the back wall of the lift carriage. He righted himself and fired again at the walls either side of the doors only to find that they were constructed from the same material. The second blast brought down a part of the ceiling, followed by several large rocks from above. He was certain that the pulse rifle would be able to easily blast through the doors on a higher power setting, but the shockwave would either destroy the equipment within or bring down the land above them. He would have to find another way in.

He slowly, and without a hint of anxiety, paced the length of the corridor and ran his hand along the join between the two doors, then struck them with all his might. It was like hitting a lump of bedrock. They didn't vibrate or even resonate any sound. Grrghracksh reached into his pouch for the Fragmentor disk and placed it in the middle of the doors. Maybe he could create a large enough hole to fire through and take out the odd little creatures. He flicked the switch and stood back. The one-metre-wide disk shape appeared within the material of the door, but the bubble never completely formed; the disk faded, and the integrity of the doors remained intact. The Fragmentor disk had run out of power and needed a Throgloid power source to re-charge. He pulled it from the doors and hurled it towards the lift where, being Throgloid technology, it didn't shatter but embedded itself in the flimsy carriage wall.

He crouched down onto his hunkers and surveyed the only barrier to his success with an invigorated determination.

ANGRY STAR

“What’s all the excitement?” Professor Wong had entered the office to an unusually electrified atmosphere and immediately approached Nick, her assistant.

“Oh, morning Professor Wong,” he gasped, without taking his eyes off the screen in front of him. “You are not going to believe what’s been occurring during the last hour or so. There’s been a massive solar eruption, almost twice as powerful as the X28 of 2003!”

“Oh my god,” inhaled Jiaying, knowing full well that if the flare of 2003 had erupted on the side of the sun facing the Earth, it would have caused major disruption. “Where did it happen?” she asked, leaning forward to tap Nick’s keyboard.

“Fortunately it happened on the far side,” said Nick, pointing to another monitor that was displaying a looped recording of the coronal mass ejection. “If that thing had been directed towards the Earth ... well, I hate to imagine the outcome.”

“I want all section leaders in the conference room in five minutes,” ordered Jiaying, and rushed back to her office to gather the necessary papers.

The crew all watched in awe at the huge tongue of light being ejected from the surface of the sun. But Oli was lost in a memory of the previous night and chuckled as he recalled their antics.

They had waited for night to fall across Britain, flew back from Thailand and picked up Sara from Richmond Park. Stephan had opted to remain in London for the time being. He would continue to pass by Jay’s old flat in case he turned up.

They arrived back in Cornwall and headed for The Office, as The Sailor’s Arms had become known, to spend the last two hours of opening time discussing a plan concerning their absent crew member. He’d turned off his phone and discarded the sim card, so Robbie couldn’t track him; he hadn’t used any electronic devices with his bank cards and he hadn’t logged on to his internet accounts. It was becoming pretty apparent that he did not want to be found.

“I thought,” said Oli, quite obviously off on some other track completely, “that we could call the ship Annia after the continent on Annenia. What do you think?”

“Are we trying to find a name for the ship?” asked Sara, feeling that possibly, and not for the first time, she’d missed something during her trip to London. Julie looked at her with wide eyes and shook her head, and Sara understood that it was only Oli who had been thinking about it.

“Sounds good to me,” said Ed. Everyone agreed, raised their glasses and toasted the good ship Annia.

When the Sailor’s closed, one too many Proper Jobs later, they headed back to the house. Five minutes later, they were heading for Mars with Oli at the helm. The journey should have taken just 4 minutes, travelling at close to the speed of light, but Oli was struggling to concentrate on the three-dimensional hologram of the red planet that had appeared as a ghostly apparition in front of the screen.

“Left a bit,” said Sara, turning her whole body, willing Oli to steer a straight course.

“Right a bit,” gasped Julie, as the red planet drifted around the edge of the control room.

“I think I’ll take us in to land,” said Robbie, arresting the controls from a slightly disgruntled Oli. The red planet was rapidly growing in the view screen. Everyone loved this part of approaching a planet. Robbie had explained that if you cut the speed too early, the final part of the journey could take longer than the travelling time from Earth to Mars. They

all lent back in their seats enjoying the sensory overload as Mars grew and grew until it occupied the entire screen. Then the detail on the surface increased in clarity as the final seconds of their near-light-speed approach came to a sudden halt 0.5 seconds before they ploughed straight through the planet, thus altering the night sky on Earth forever. They orbited the planet until they were over the side that was currently experiencing night time and entered the weak atmosphere, landing on a flat piece of land in the pitch dark. Everyone gathered in the cargo bay and waited patiently as the door opened to the cold Martian air.

“How are we going to move it?” asked Oli, who’d come up with the plan whilst enjoying the final moments of the pub. “That thing must weigh a tonne.”

Just as he’d finished asking the question, the blank form of the drone began to form next to them.

“Oh yeah,” said Oli, realising that if you needed something heavy moving, the drone was your man, or drone, or non-specific entity, or ... Oli was busy trying to figure out a suitable nomenclature for the drone, when it took one step outside the ship and its leg disintegrated. It began hopping around the cargo bay much to the amusement of everyone present and was shortly joined by the many thousands of nano-drones that reformed its leg.

“Why does that keep happening? What’s wrong with the drones?” asked Oli, attempting to bypass the hilarity of the drone hopping about the place.

“It seems to be some problem with electromagnetic interference,” said Robbie. He’d discovered the same level of disturbance at the nuclear power plant, but had attributed it to their proximity to the reactor. But there were no nuclear reactors on Mars, so what was causing it to happen here?

“The moment the drone steps outside the shielding of the ship, the nano-drones lose all bonding capability. I’ll perform further tests when we return to Earth, while you all sleep off the effects of the Proper Job.”

They hadn’t come all this way for nothing though. They had an important mission to complete and drone or no drone they were determined, between bouts of giggling like school girls, to complete it. They left Annia and using the enhanced night vision provided by the Go-rings, walked across the dusty landscape followed faithfully by a cloud of nano-drones. They could see the outline of their intended target just one hundred metres away. It was completely stationary now, as it always was during the night-time. The rover was the most sophisticated piece of machinery ever sent into space and a marvel of human engineering, but it was completely blind at night and totally available for larking about by a group of overly-jubilant earthlings.

“It’s pretty impressive when you think about it,” whispered Ed, running his hand over the frame of the Rover.

“Why are you whispering?” whispered Oli.

“I don’t know,” whispered Ed. Then continuing in his normal voice, “I mean, they fired this on the end of a rocket at a moving planet from another moving planet and landed it, not only on that moving planet but in the exact crater that they were aiming for. I mean, credit where credit’s due, that was a pretty amazing shot considering the level of technology they have at their disposal.”

They all agreed and stood there for a while bestowing congratulatory pats on the Mars Rover.

“Right then,” said Julie, always up for a prank, “let’s mess with their heads.”

With the help of the nano-drones, they picked up the front wheels of the Rover being extremely careful not to knock any of the sensitive instruments and with a certain amount of huffing and puffing, interspersed with giggling and snorting, they turned the Rover around through one-hundred-and-eighty degrees.

“I’d love to be sitting in mission control when they download their first pictures tomorrow,” said Ed, brushing his hands together to clear the dust from them.

“I’ll send a drone over to NASA tonight to record the whole thing,” said Robbie, through everyone’s Go-ring. After all, a prank of this magnitude was worth recording for posterity.

They walked back to Annia with the nano-drones following behind, clearing their footprints. When they lifted off, the ship hovered for a while allowing the drones to wipe out the imprints left by the ship’s legs. They laughed all the way back to Cornwall, parked the ship and went to bed, satisfied with their evenings work ... except of course for their inability to locate Jay.

“That is what is known as a Coronal Mass Ejection,” said Robbie. “They occur all the time and if they’re directed towards the Earth, they can disrupt communications and even knock out power grids. If it wasn’t for the magnetic field, which deflects the charged particles harmlessly around the Earth, they could strip away the atmosphere and lay waste to everything, as happened on Mars eighty-five million years ago.”

“This latest ejection is unlike any other in recorded history, and I’m talking about my records. It’s what the Annenians used to call a planet fryer.”

Robbie had a recording of a planet fryer in action from a star system, twenty light years from Annenia. It had happened fifty-three thousand years before they even came to Earth. He explained how the Annenian scientists were given plenty of warning that the star was about to produce an unparalleled flare directed towards an L-class planet. ‘L’ in this instance standing for ‘Life’. Sara put her hand to her mouth and gave a gasp as a picture of the planet appeared on the screen. It was similar to Earth in appearance, with patches of green and brown, all linked together with deep blue oceans. Clouds circled the planet creating spiral forms as they moved. Like every other L-class planet in the galaxy, it was a magnificent sight, the result of billions of years of stellar design-and-build, with a little bit of luck thrown in.

As they watched the screen, it looked like someone had held a giant blow torch to it. The clouds were swept into space, creating a wispy tail behind the planet making it look like a giant, colourful comet. The land turned orange and red and the oceans were vaporised, creating a trail of debris moving away from the once-perfect jewel at close to the speed of light. What was left after a matter of minutes was a husk of a world looking exactly like the planet on which they’d been walking the previous night.

“That ...” started Robbie, obviously as affected by the video as the rest of the crew, “was what your scientists would class as an X50 solar flare; the event that just erupted from the far side of the sun was an X54.”

“Were there people on that planet?” asked Sara.

“There were no sentient life forms present, but there were a few potentials, given a few million years or so and maybe some interference from an advanced race such as the Annenians, who knows?”

Robbie continued to explain that the flare of charged particles was heading away from the sun, fortunately in the opposite direction to Earth, but it would hit Cranus in less than one hour. The whole idea of leaving Cranus on the far side of the sun to avoid detection from Earth was suddenly looking somewhat less than flawless.

“We’ll have to go and move it,” said Oli, posing more of a question than a statement.

“I’ve already started preparing the ship to leave,” replied Robbie. “If that flare hits Cranus without any power or protective shields, there won’t be enough left of it to build a Reliant Robin.”

The perfectly smooth sides of the tunnel flashed past and the ship entered the sea at over three hundred kilometres per hour. If a diver had been sat on the sea bed at the entrance to the tunnel, they would have heard a loud splash accompanied by muffled screams, rapidly fading into the distance.

“I’ve finished the tunnel,” said Robbie, “It means that we can exit the cave more promptly than before.”

“Really?” jibed Oli, catching his breath and attempting to regulate his erratic, palpitating heartbeat. The process of waking up was something to which Oli preferred to dedicate some time, especially on a morning that was following a night before. As they all realised that they were safe and that the ship wasn’t burrowing into the centre of the Earth, everyone started laughing nervously. As they left Earth and skimmed the surface of the Moon at close to light speed, Ed who had been caught short the moment he stood up, emerged from the bedroom chewing one of the after-toilet biscuits. It had taken a while for everyone to come to terms with the fact that you could eat a Hobnob-like snack that had been constructed from all the re-useable matter in your own poo. But the biscuits were so delicious that even Sara eventually came around to the concept.

“Mmm, curry,” said Ed, halting in the doorway trying to remember what he had eaten on the beach in Thailand the previous night. They had all ordered something special to go with their cocktails and he was almost certain that he’d had fish.

“Didn’t you have curry?” asked Ed, looking straight at Oli.

“If you left your biscuit in the machine then I’m eating your ...”

He put his hand to his mouth and ran back to the bedroom, from where guttural noises could be heard all the way to the sun.

“Oops,” offered Oli, as the girls fell about laughing.

It took fifteen minutes to fly past the sun and reach Cranus, which was orbiting the star at an equal distance to the Earth. It looked completely dead with no lights showing, but at least it was still there. It didn’t matter how many times Oli saw the one-kilometre-long star transporter Cranus, it still looked darned impressive. Like a giant whale shark serenely drifting through space, waiting for him to order it to pick up its tail and careen through the cosmos at fifty times the speed of light. They docked and made their way to the control room, joined by a very green-looking Ed. Oli sat in the command seat, placed his hand on the panel that had swung in front of him and uttered the immortal word that would power up the mighty Cranus.

“Halibut.” Just like any other computer, he could change the password at any time, but Oli always stuck with his first impressions and Halibut, as far as Oli was concerned, seemed to suit the task.

The consuls lit up, messages flashed on the curved main screen and everyone started tapping buttons to operate their various systems. Robbie had spent the last week drip feeding the crew the knowledge required to operate the ship’s controls. He hadn’t informed them of their new-found abilities, so as Sara engaged the navigation instruments and Julie powered up the Graviton Generators, they gave each other excited glances across the star-shaped consul. They knew exactly what they were doing, as though they had always known, but they couldn’t explain how they knew. Ed discovered that he was in charge of communications and sensors and felt a slight pang of disappointment as he scanned the solar flare and placed a three-dimensional hologram in the centre of the control room. He then realised that he was also in charge of the Graviton weapon and a wry smile appeared across his face.

The hologram showed the edge of the sun, a massive tongue of plasma moving away at close to light speed and further out, the position of Cranus. He tapped the key pad and a figure appeared above the ship: 00.33.12 this related to the time in hours, minutes and

seconds before the flare would hit the ship. Now that Cranus was powered up with the ability to raise its protective shields, they could have flown the ship straight into the flare without any repercussions whatsoever ... so they did.

Robbie wanted to take a closer look at the origin of the super flare. An event on any star of this magnitude was always preceded by stirrings deep within the Photosphere. It should have taken weeks to build to this point. In fact, the sun was at a very stable period in its long life; this type of event shouldn't ever transpire in such a mature stellar body.

"Earth scientists are just beginning to understand the internal structure of the sun, but I'm afraid that they're a rather long way away from predicting sunspots or mass ejections." Robbie continued as the ship flew into the oncoming flare of charged particles. "The Annenians built a shield that could surround the entire planet and boost the effectiveness of the magnetic field in warding off these dangerous events. Rather ironically, the power to drive this shield was gathered from the star itself."

Robbie was rather enjoying the crew's undivided attention to his every word until he realised that their speed of 0.8 light and the speed of the particles hitting the force field was about equal, these factors had combined to produce a closing speed of light 1.6, and the collisions that resulted were producing a rather spectacular effect on the main screen.

"Woaw!" said Oli.

Ed tapped a few buttons and the display changed to a three-dimensional representation and particles of light darted across the control room,

"Woaw, indeed!" agreed the crew.

Robbie chuckled to himself and continued to probe the layers beneath the sun's chromosphere.

"That's rather odd," he said, as the light show abated and the crew re-joined him in the control room.

"What's odd?" asked Oli, slightly concerned.

The screen now showed a section of the surface of the sun which had about twenty black dots gathered in proximity to one another. Ed tapped a few buttons and the image appeared to zoom into one of the dots, which then left the screen and moved across the room. The curved screen was now showing the inside of the chromosphere with a tendril of magnetic influence leading across the room to the hovering black dot. As Ed enhanced the image further, a black swirling mass came into view, rather like a tornado on Earth that was linked by similar branches to every other black dot on the surface.

"That's very odd," said Robbie, highlighting the vortex with a red square and enlarging it further.

"What is it?" asked Ed, the gravitational readings are bending the needle.

"Well, if I'm not very much mistaken," said Robbie, "and let's face it ... well anyway, it would appear to be a static negative-mass super-gravitational incursion in real space-time."

"Oh," said Oli looking around the control room at the blank looks, "well that's OK, then ... isn't it?"

"Oh sorry," said Robbie, temporarily forgetting to whom he was talking. "Put on your Neural Feed Sets and I'll explain." A small flap opened in the panels in front of everyone and out slid an NFS for each of them. They placed the stupidly light headphones on their temples and blinked as the green flash appeared for a fraction of a second somewhere behind their eyes.

"Blimey," said Oli.

The Annenians had experimented, thousands of years ago with creating a passageway through four-dimensional space-time to pass quickly from one point to another in theoretically, any part of the universe. They had surmised that an almost infinitely powerful

point of gravity was needed to begin the process and so experimented in deep space where the spectacularly failed attempts could not be responsible for the destruction of any planetary systems.

Creating a black hole was relatively easy; all they had to do was unleash the power from a Graviton Generator into a point so small that it almost defied existence, but these black holes were usually short lived and very unstable.

On one occasion the science ship, Superior Intellect, with two thousand Annenians on board, was attempting to introduce anti-matter into the equation, in the belief that a negative mass matter was needed to stabilise the gravity well. The lead scientist, Sssrindo, was one of Annenia's most celebrated intellects. He'd been responsible for drawing up the plans for the giant solar pyramid that provided power to the entire planet. His contributions had been paramount in the development of the shield that protected Annenia from just about everything. But he was most celebrated for his invention of glasses that allowed the wearer to see the effects of solar wind on the magnetic field of a planet at global parties. Oli made a mental note to search for a pair of those the very next time they went to Annenia.

In the split second of NFS transfer, the crew had acquired memory of the recording that showed a swirling vortex in space, identical to the one that they were viewing on the screen. Then suddenly there was a flash and lots of shouting in the control room of the Superior Intellect. For some reason, not explained by any of the data, the Graviton drives of the science ship had overloaded and were threatening to implode, taking the ship and crew with them. So, the captain jettisoned the Graviton Generators in the hope that they would create their own little black hole and disappear without affecting the ship and crew. Unfortunately, as the Generators were ejected into space, they drifted away from the Superior Intellect straight towards the event that Sssrindo and his team had just created, but hadn't had time to name yet. They all watched in horror as the Generators slowly tumbled towards the swirling mass.

"Oh ..." said Sssrindo, scratching his extremely pronounced forehead. "I wonder what that will do."

He didn't have to wait too long for an answer. All three Generators drifted directly into the swirling mass and the final one to enter must have imploded right at the edge of the vortex, for that was the end of the recording. Records showed that the ship and all its two thousand Annenian crew were presumed lost. No wreckage was ever found, and the project was closed, never to be re-opened and everyone on Annenia got together for the most massive party ever seen to celebrate Sssrindo's life.

"And you think that this is the same kind of thing that killed Sssrindo?" asked Oli, placing the NFS gently back into the flap on his consul.

"Yes," said Robbie, "and there's more bad news I'm afraid. It would appear to be positioned in exactly the spot where the Throgloid vessel exploded."

"Ooops," said Oli, realising that they'd played a part in creating something that could quite realistically destroy the Earth.

"Ooops?" asked Sara. "Ooops?" again. "I think this deserves a little more than Ooops, like how are we going to fix it, or are there going to be more of those mass ejaculation things?" Although the timing was completely inappropriate, this did raise more than a titter about the control room, even Robbie snorted. Sara just scowled.

"The Graviton and anti-matter explosion occurred at a particularly sweet spot in the gravity well of the sun and opened what I once theorised as an Einstein-Rosen Bridge, or as you may be more familiar, a wormhole. What's more, it's stable. This is a pivotal moment in scientific history, if we can understand the precise conditions that created the bridge and reproduce them ... well the possibilities are endless. Travel to the far side of the

galaxy, which would have been impossible even at multiple light speeds. We may even be able to journey to other galaxies. Humanity could spread throughout the universe!”

Robbie calmed down from his obvious enthusiasm and seemed to contemplate this proposal for a short while then said, “One step at a time though, hmm?”

“So why isn’t it sucking in all the sun around it then?” asked Oli, getting more to grips with this subject than even he could believe.

“Wormholes don’t suck,” said Robbie. “Black holes suck; wormholes just sit there waiting for someone to be stupid enough to go through them and see where they lead, bearing in mind that theoretically it could be anywhere in the universe.”

Just then, the screen turned bright white and everyone on the bridge had to look away to protect their eyes. Robbie pulled back the view to the surface of the sun and they watched in shocked amazement as great arcs of magnetism curled away from the sun, linking all the black spots together. The super-heated plasma arced hundreds of thousands of kilometres into space then collapsed back into the corona and an explosion the size of Jupiter fired an even bigger flare out towards Cranus.

The screen lit up in more colours than could possibly exist and an unmistakable look of concern appeared on Oli’s face as Cranus shook slightly, causing everyone to turn to him with panic in their eyes.

“Like I can do anything about it,” he said.

Even when the Throgloid ship had fired all their weapons at Cranus from point-blank range, there wasn’t so much as a tremor to be felt. What the hell just hit them and were the shields strong enough?

“Shields are intact,” said Ed, pre-empting Oli’s question, “but we cannae take another hit like that captain.” Only Oli and Ed laughed, but they cut their amusement short when the girls both gave them The Stare!

“Well I think that answers the question about whether or not there’s going to be any more coronal mass ejaculations,” said Robbie, absolutely dead pan. “The area of negative mass within the wormhole has created a gravitational vacuum within the chromosphere. This has never even been posited as a theory, but it would appear the sun doesn’t like it up it very much.”

“Well at least one bit of luck is on our side,” offered Oli, trying desperately to find one scrap of silver lining in this big black cloud. “At least it’s pointing away from Earth.”

“For now,” said Robbie. You’re forgetting that the sun rotates on its axis. The speed of rotation varies due to the latitude on the sun’s surface. I have calculated that the rotational period of this problem area is approximately 27.27 days. We have about ten days before the mass ejections begin to affect the Earth. This will begin with electronic disruption, satellite malfunction and loss of mobile phone networks. Then as the sun rotates so that the event is angled at around fifteen degrees away from the Earth, power grids will collapse and anything that requires electricity will be rendered useless. Every single piece of data that has been collected since the dawn of technology will be erased, even that which is stored deep underground. Then finally, the event will point directly towards Earth and using the current regularity of ejections as a benchmark, the Earth will be hit seven times by the full force of the flares ... there will be nothing left.”

Oli was just about to suggest that Robbie worked on his bedside manner a bit when Julie interjected.

“This is totally bum.”

“How do we stop it? Can we put Cranus between the sun and the Earth and use it as a shield?” Oli asked. It seemed pretty obvious. If Cranus could fly into the flare, then surely it could deflect it away from Earth.

“I’m afraid not,” said Robbie. “The flares are over two hundred thousand kilometres in diameter at source; we could only deflect a small portion away from the planet.”

“What about that magnetic field booster on Annenia?” asked Sara, to looks of sheer disbelief from everyone. “We could bring it back here in time to save Earth from the worst of the damage, couldn’t we?”

“The shield booster occupies a large portion of the solar pyramid and weighs somewhere in the region of three million tonnes. It wasn’t designed to be mobile.” Robbie continued, following a short pause where he confirmed that there was only one obvious course of action. “We have to go through the bridge, find out what is stabilising the other side and shut it down without getting trapped on some planet at the other end of the universe.”

“No problem.” said Ed, already increasing the power to the defensive shielding. “We shut it down and fly back home ... job done.” He clapped his hands together as though he still had some Martian dust on them and wanted rid of it.

“Unfortunately, there’s no way of telling where this bridge leads.” explained Robbie. “It could take us to a neighbouring star system or it could be connected to a point on the other side of the galaxy. The galaxy measures one hundred and seven thousand light years across and even at light 50, it would take us two thousand one hundred and forty years to return to Earth. I’m sending a drone through to attempt to signal back to Earth. The galactic frequency covers up to 2.5 light years per second. Now, assuming the other side of the bridge is located on the far side of the galaxy, a signal from the probe would require 11.9 hours to reach us here. So, I can use the delay, if there is one, between the sending of the signal and our receipt of it to determine the distance through real space between the two points.”

Blank looks all round.

“I’ll just do it,” said Robbie, launching a drone probe into the bridge. They watched on the screen as it flew into the outer layers of the sun and then disappeared into the centre of the spinning hole. The vortex surrounding the hole began to spin faster momentarily and great plumes of plasma erupted from the suns corona like a spinning wheel on November the fifth. Then as soon as it had begun, the vortex resumed its previous attitude and the probe was gone.

Doctor Branith and George had finally returned home following the journey from hell. They’d managed to persuade one of the army drivers to take them to Liverpool’s Lime Street station for the first part of their journey. Doctor Branith was tired, angry and in no mood for polite conversation and George was wondering if this was going to be the longest two hours of his life. He had his laptop with him, so he could probably immerse himself in work for the duration of the journey. Unfortunately, the powers of wretched misfortune were plotting even further to ruin their day as somebody, who was obviously experiencing even deeper woes, decided to end it all on the West Coast Main line underneath the 17.25 from Liverpool Lime Street to London Euston.

As the train braked suddenly, George grabbed his laptop as it began to slide from the table and Doctor Branith closed his eyes and threw his head back in dismay. “What now?” he sighed, “hasn’t this day finished with me yet?”

George was straining his head against the window trying to look along the length of the train, but there was nothing to see. Several minutes passed before any announcement was made and nobody was any the wiser even then. The police soon arrived and started moving around outside the train. The passengers were wondering if there was a bomb on board and some were becoming restless. Then George saw a young-looking policeman who didn’t even look old enough to drink, walking along the track. He had spotted something

under the train and walked to the edge of the carriage directly below George. Two seconds later he was stumbling across the other tracks, exhaling his lunch into a bush.

"It's a jumper." said George, loud enough so that the other passengers could hear him. "We're going nowhere!"

As was the tradition of British police, they wouldn't allow anyone off the train in case somebody saw the remains and became emotionally scarred by the experience and then sued the police force for a totally extraneous sum of money, so the passengers were asked to remain seated and calm. Two hours passed as a crime scene investigation team arrived and photographed the area. They erected a white screen around the body, at which point Doctor Branith felt certain that they would be permitted to disembark. But unfortunately, the police had to collect up the various parts of the once-dejected person that were strewn along the track.

Doctor Branith began to rant to George. "I don't give a damn if someone wants to end it all, but why do they have to do it under my train? I mean, what's wrong with a few pills, or a tall building or opening a vein? Why do they always have to bugger up my day?" He realised that he was shouting and out of the corner of his eye he saw several faces appear from behind their seats. He settled back into his position with his face pressed against the glass searching for some sign of movement.

Finally, the passengers were shepherded from the train to several waiting busses to continue their journey south. Further delays due to the daily and almost obligatory accident on the M25 elevated Doctor Branith's blood pressure to near-critical. George was convinced at one point that the doctor's face had taken on a purple hue. Luckily though, for both their sakes, their driver was waiting for them at the bus station to take them back to the lab. The day was almost spent, the ship had evaded capture once again and Doctor Branith was teetering on the edge of a meltdown.

They arrived at the lab to find a young man waiting for them outside the door. He was mixed-race, casually dressed in the opinion of George but shabby according to Doctor Branith, and he was leaning against the waist-high wall that surrounded the front of the building. He saw the car arrive and immediately pushed himself upright and took a couple of exploratory steps towards the car. He seemed nervous and was unsure whether to approach the vehicle or to wait for the two men to come to him.

"I have no idea who that is George," said Doctor Branith as he opened the car door, "and I have no desire to find out. You can deal with him. If he's looking for a job, tell him he can have mine."

They walked towards the square white building in which they had both spent a considerable portion of their waking life during the previous two years. The youth held out his hand as they approached but Doctor Branith pushed straight past and as George put his hand out to receive the young man and guide him away from his agitated boss, Doctor Branith unlocked the door and slipped into the sanctuary of his second home, although his wife would question the validity of that classification.

He threw his brief case on the desk and slumped into his chair. As he rubbed his eyes with both arms resting on the desk, he realised through slightly blurred vision that George had entered the office and he wasn't alone.

"What is the meaning of this?" he barked, "I wasn't being serious George for crying out loud."

"Just listen to him for one minute," said George, pushing the young man closer to the desk with a hand on his shoulder. "I really do think that you will be more than a little interested in what he has to say."

The young man stepped towards the desk, looking even more nervous than he had done when they arrived. Doctor Branith examined his face as he stood there. He looked like a

school pupil who had been brought before the head with the sole purpose of confessing to some heinous crime.

“Well?” asked Doctor Branith, his impatience limit having been reached, surpassed and buried all in one day. “What’s your name lad? Let’s start with something easy, shall we?”

The young man slowly held out his hand across Doctor Branith’s desk and said, “Jay ... Jay Roberts.”

Three hours had passed aboard Cranus and no signal had been detected from the probe. The crew were concluding the inevitable truth that the bridge connected with somewhere far across the galaxy or beyond. As they waited, the sun continued spewing its stellar flatulence into space. The planet Mercury was first in line to be hit and Robbie took the ship into a close orbit above the dead planet to witness the effect of the solar wind on the surface. With very little atmosphere to compromise and a magnetic field a mere fraction of that on Earth, he figured that it would make a suitable test case to study. A solar flare erupted from the surface of the sun, and five minutes later the crew had front row seats to the stripping clean of Mercury’s tenuous atmosphere and magnetic field.

Ed adjusted the screen so that the entire spectrum of light from radio waves to gamma waves was visible. As the solar storm hit the outer reaches of the planet’s magnetosphere, long streaks of plasma snaked around the invisible field and curled around the back of the planet like eddies in a fast-moving river. Then as the full force of the stellar hurricane attacked the protective barrier, it became compressed and the electrons, photons and ions crept ever closer to the surface creating magnetic tornados that swirled hundreds of kilometres into space, spinning at a rate of many thousands of revolutions per minute. Some of these twisting monsters touched down on the rocky exterior of the planet and hurled huge boulders out into space, to be picked up by the unstoppable current and powered away from the planet at one third the speed of light. Finally, the weak magnetic defence collapsed completely, offering up the naked planet to be ravaged by the torrent of charged particles.

Julie had her hand over her mouth in horror as the solar storm abated and left a trail of debris moving away from Mercury and out into deep space. The solar wind had stripped away three billion tons of dust and rock from the surface of the planet, and everyone on the bridge of Cranus immediately understood what would happen to the relatively innocuous atmosphere clinging to the surface of Earth if it was left to encounter this maelstrom.

“We’ve got to go through,” said Oli, still staring open-mouthed at the apocalyptic scene on the screen. “If anyone doesn’t want to come with us we’ll drop you off back on Earth right now, but we’ve got to stop this from happening to Earth.” He punched out every syllable with his index finger on the control panel in front of him and everyone gasped in shock as Cranus narrowly missed the slightly shrunken Mercury as it blasted away at light 50. Oli looked down and realised that he’d hit several buttons in his determination to get the point across and they were currently three hundred thousand kilometres from their previous position.

“Ooops,” he said, slowly turning Cranus around and heading back to the sun at a more leisurely pace.

Ed laughed at his friend’s oafishness and the girls just tutted.

“I don’t think any of us want to be left behind this time,” said Julie, looking around for any dissenting views, but everyone was in full agreement: they would go through the bridge, find a way to close it down and return home in time for beers at The Office. The fact that they may end up on the other side of the galaxy or further, and never return to Earth, was a fact

that to Robbie's delight and a strange feeling that he assumed was pride, was never raised as a consideration.

MASSIVE OOPS!

As Grrghracksh crouched in the corridor scrutinising the blast doors, he dug deep into the very murky recesses of his memory trying to recall his first command. He wasn't sure why this was relevant, but a nagging thought was poking the more sentient parts of his armour-plated head.

He had been given charge of a Gagmazi battle tank on a mission to intercept and destroy a convoy of Magi foot soldiers. The battle tank was more analogous to a mobile fortress than a vehicle. It was one hundred metres long, every inch of which was bristling with weaponry and defence systems. It ran on forty-eight pairs of steel tracks that could propel it straight through the sturdiest of buildings or over the steepest of hills. There were very few weapons that could inflict much more than a scratch on the metre-thick armour plating, so the generally accepted reaction to the appearance of a battle tank on the horizon was to run as though one's pants were on fire. Or so had been the status quo, up until Grrghracksh accepted his command.

He was standing at the control console at the back of the bridge, from where he could masterfully conduct his orchestra of miscreants. All eyes were pasted to the screen at the front of the bridge as the tank trundled down the dirt road that led to the border between the Gagmazi and the Magi land. This area was known as the messed-up-zone, because that was essentially what you had done if you found yourself there, also it's how you would end up if you remained there for any length of time.

It was a perfect day on Throwgus. The acid rain was dissolving the iron-alloy paint from the deck of the tank and the hurricane-force winds would have stripped even the most stubborn of facial hair and indeed most of the flesh from an unprotected Throgloid chin. All is well with the world, thought Grrghracksh, as he ordered a sensor sweep of the messed-up-zone.

"I've got two hundred armoured foot soldiers bearing 085 degrees, Commander," said the communications officer, a rather geeky sort for a Throgloid, the kind of yappy little arse-puppy that Grrghracksh would usually take great pleasure in tormenting if it wasn't for the fact that he was the most useful comms tech that Grrghracksh had ever met.

"Weapons?" asked Grrghracksh.

"Fully-enclosed armoured Androsuits, assault cannons, armour-piercing atomic rifles and a few non-descript devices that are probably explosives of some kind." The science officer waited for a reply or another order, but nothing came. All Throgloid soldiers were terrified of their commanding officers for good reason. They only became a commanding officer by killing their commanding officer, and by the very nature of their ascension they were particularly hard to kill. Paghrach, the communications officer, had survived for many years whilst witnessing the passing of countless colleagues, despite being of diminutive stature, purely because he was a genius with electronics. He'd discovered early on in his career that even the most injudicious of commanders would move hell and Throwgus - even though the two were largely indiscernible - to protect such a valuable asset.

"Full attack!" Grrghracksh growled, and the battle tank swung through twenty degrees on its port side tracks to face the enemy. They would go in, forward guns blazing and all twenty banks of mortars on the roof of the tank releasing their death hail upon the enemy. If anything survived that onslaught, which was very unlikely, then they would go in close with the rapid firing broadside of laser cannons that lined the entire length of the vehicle. These Magi intruders would regret ever setting foot in Grrghracksh's land. Technically, they hadn't set foot across the border yet, but that could easily be overlooked in the interest of sport.

The small screen next to the commander showed the lines of troops trudging through the mud and rocks that made up the messed-up-zone. Each of the Androsuits stood seven metres tall when upright, but could drop to the four-legged position for fast movement. The driver was positioned in the middle of the back, in a gimble capsule that was fully enclosed within the armour-plated exterior. They were tough, but their main line of attack was speed. Once in the prone position, moving on all fours, they could move at sixty kilometres per hour and change direction in a heartbeat. Grrghracksh wanted to destroy as many of them as possible before they could drop.

“Fire!” he shouted, to the rows of gun operators within the control room, and the battle tank shuddered with a deafening cacophony as the weapons spewed yet more radioactive junk into the dead zone. The bridge crew cheered as the front ten ranks of enemy disappeared in a hail of ordinance, but they were soon dragged back into battle mode when, from the settling cloud of debris, appeared the first of the charging Androsuits.

“Hard about!” shouted Grrghracksh, grabbing hold of the rail next to his position in preparation for the jarring turn that the helmsman was about to instigate. The battle tank slewed through ninety degrees and presented the fortress-like side to the assailing enemy.

“Fire!” shouted Grrghracksh, with a clenched fist thrust out towards the monitor. A rapid staccato beating and sucking sound followed as the laser pulses burned their way through the air leaving nanosecond-long vacuums within the atmosphere that slammed shut as soon as they were created. There were far too many per second to ever be able to determine the quantity, but the monitor next to the commander showed well enough the impressive effect of seventy rapid-firing laser cannons lighting up the shadowy land around them.

Androsuits were exploding and crashing to the ground in a bundle of limbs and body parts. It’s like shooting gobrats in a barrel, thought Grrghracksh, as his heart raced to the beat of the cannons. His first command was going to be a glorious experience. He would dine well that evening, drink buckets full of Garg beer and waste the rest of the night locked in the gruesome grasp of some poor unsuspecting dance Throg; preferably female ... but by no means essentially so.

As he was congratulating himself on his brilliance and losing his way in the imagination of the night to come, one of the Androsuits managed to break through the barrage of fire and get close to the tank. Once within one hundred metres of the flank, the laser cannons were unable to lower their fire enough to hit the relatively tiny target. The only weapons that were of any use were small arms projectile weapons that were fired by hand from slits along the length of the tank, but these simply bounced off the armour plating.

“Kill it!” shouted Grrghracksh, as he panned the camera to follow the lone soldier approaching the side of his battle tank. It raised itself up on two legs and pulled something round from a compartment in the front of its torso. It slammed the object onto the side of the tank and four legs sprung from the sphere locking it in place. Then the Androsuit dropped back to four legs and ran along the length of the battle tank avoiding all fire. But as it emerged behind the tank, the rear defence systems automatically vaporised it with laser cannons. Grrghracksh ordered a detail to exit the tank at ground level and remove that device from his vehicle, but before they could even open the hatch there was a flash, and everything went dead.

Lacking any windows to admit even the tiniest amount of light, the control room turned as black as the heart of a tank commander. Grrghracksh groped around the control panel for something that might give them some light, but nothing was working.

”Commander! we’ve been hit by an electro-magnetic pulse.” shouted Paghrach, above the din of shouting and stumbling Throglods. “I’m trying to regain some power, but the reactor is off-line. I’ll switch to emergency batteries, but that will just give us lights, and

not for very long.” Two seconds later a faint glow appeared in the room and Grrghracksh could just make out the chaos that was ensuing. Many of the bridge crew had panicked and tried to exit. An irrational fear of the dark was a common trait amongst certain Throgloids. It stemmed from a period thirty years before when the Magi had invented an opaque force field that they somehow managed to fashion into a dome over the capital city of Gaggmazi. The force field knocked out all electrical devices and millions of Throgloids were trapped in complete darkness for two months before the forces outside the dome managed to destroy the generators. Panic ensued, and thousands died from incidents such as running off buildings or bumping into an equally panicked Throgloid with a Grax in his hands. The incident resulted in a generation of Throgloids that were afraid of the dark, although they would never admit it to anyone. After all, a three-metre-tall battle warrior who must sleep with the landing light on, is not going to instil much fear in the enemy.

“Silence!” shouted Grrghracksh, vibrating the steel plates that formed the walls of the bridge. Whether it was the volume of his voice or the fact that the low lighting was casting his shadow and that of his Grax across the length of the room, he couldn’t be sure, but it worked. Everyone sat down and awaited instruction, except for one particularly affected young recruit who was soon silenced by the tip of Grrghracksh’s Grax resting against his brow.

“Status?” demanded the commander, still staring with his lifeless eyes down the length of his Grax straight into the terrified eyes of the young recruit.

“We’ve lost all power Commander. We have no weapons, no defences; we can’t even open the doors to leave,” said Paghrach, suddenly realising a certain design flaw with the escape mechanisms of the monumental battle tank.

“Come with me.” said Grrghracksh, turning his gaze on Paghrach and marching towards the exit from the bridge. Fortunately, this door had been open when the pulse struck so they weren’t completely trapped, but it wasn’t long before they came across the first closed door. Grrghracksh wanted to reach the reactor room to see if Paghrach could get it started again, but the reactor was housed deep within the belly of the beast and they would have many heavy steel doors to negotiate en route. He handed his Grax to Paghrach, something that he would never do if there was any chance that the fellow was actually capable of swinging it, and he placed his huge hands against the door and attempted to slide it open, but it wouldn’t even rattle within its housing.

“Give me your command device!” instructed Paghrach, immediately regretting the authoritative tone that his voice had adopted. Every commander in the Throgloid army possessed a unique control pad connected to the vehicle that they commanded. If for any reason they felt that they were losing control, they could shut down the entire system or even order it to self-destruct. It was a fail-safe get-out-of-dishonour-free card that was only available to the lowest of the low. Paghrach knew that these devices were shielded from all outside interference, including electromagnetic radiation. He strained with both hands to give Grrghracksh back his Grax, unable to raise the point from the floor and a smile appeared on the commander’s face as he took it, swung it through the air with one hand and slid it into the scabbard on his back. He turned around so that Paghrach wouldn’t see where he concealed the device and turned to face the diminutive genius. There was no way on Throwgus that he would ever have ordinarily offered the power of the palm-sized unit to anyone, but this was an emergency and he was certain that Paghrach would do anything in his ability to survive. Anyway, all the systems were offline, so he couldn’t initiate the self-destruct sequence. He handed the device to Paghrach, who squeezed a key on the side and let out a little Yaaar as the screen lit up.

“What are you trying to do?” demanded Grrghracksh, never really understanding the concept of patience.

“I’m going to attempt to communicate with the door mechanism.” said Paghrach tapping away on the miniature keyboard. “I won’t be able to open the door because that would require too much energy, but every electronic door has a finite number of connections, the control pad will locate the relevant circuit to free the locking mechanism allowing you to push it open. He tapped away for a few more seconds and held the device against the door control panel before hitting the final key. There was a dull clunk from inside the wall and Grrghracksh immediately lent against the door which slid open with very little effort. He turned to Paghrach and gave him a hearty slap on his back, sending him skipping through the open door.

As they worked their way through the tank, Paghrach instructed Grrghracksh in the technique that he was employing. It wasn’t until the fifth door that his rather technophobic brain managed to put all the pieces together and grasp the system that Paghrach had devised.

“This will get you into any electronically-controlled door ...”

The words echoed around Grrghracksh’s hollow scull and he raised himself up from his crouching position and approached the tiresome blast doors. He pulled the control pad, all that was left of his ship that had exploded in the star, from his secret pocket and placed it against the entry pad on the wall. He thought for a while trying to recall the correct sequence that Paghrach had taught him before coming to his untimely end. Well he couldn’t have allowed the little fellow to teach everyone how to open doors; that was going to be his own personal secret.

Commander Shhti Jaad was speaking with her superiors at the MSS, attempting to formulate a plan for their forces to gain access to the underground facility, when she heard a loud clunk. She turned, and to her horror saw the blast doors inching their way open. Her security personnel ran to the ever-widening gap and started firing indiscriminately into the corridor beyond. The noise was deafening as their automatic weapons spat a torrent of projectiles between the doors. One of the engineers ran to the door control and began tapping in a code over and over whilst cowering from the relentless clatter of automatic fire. But the doors continued their painfully slow progress into the walls. One of the guards threw a stun grenade into the corridor and they all turned their heads as the compression blast entered the control room and smoke billowed through the opening. They ceased fire, certain that nothing could have survived the barrage of fire, but they kept their guns trained on the doorway as the two doors finally settled with a resounding clunk into their fully open positions.

As the smoke cleared the disbelief crossed all their faces at once as they saw the giant monster emerge from the side of the corridor looking straight at them and shaking his head slowly from side to side. They opened fire again, but the monster nonchalantly walked into the room, bullets ricocheting off its body, and drew a massive sword from his back. With one sweep of the blade, Grrghracksh sliced the barrels from five guns, brought the Grax over his head ready for another swing only to see every one of the feeble creatures drop their weapons and scurry past him like bog rats, out through the door and into the lift. He pressed a key on his pad and the blast door began to close. Now all he had to do was work out how to interface his communication pad with this rather primitive-looking equipment and send a message that would bring the rest of his fleet to level this insignificant moon and take him back to the ugly creature’s planet, where they would hunt and dine till they could eat no more.

Shhti Jaad, who hadn’t fled with the rest of her group, realised that firing on the creature was futile, so she lowered her hand gun as Grrghracksh glared at her, and placed it on the floor. She flinched as Grrghracksh moved across the floor towards her, he crouched down directly in front of her bringing his head down level with her eyes and without taking

his dead eyes off her, he picked up her gun, inspected it, grunted quietly under his breath and crushed it with one mighty grip. She raised her pencil-thin eyebrow at him and said, "What is it that you want?" Of course, with no form of translating device present in the building or on the entire moon for that matter, Grrghracksh had no idea what it was that the spirited little creature had just said. He pulled an electronic pad that fitted snugly in the palm of his hand from his suit and held it towards the banks of computers that covered the room. He pressed a few buttons and the pad began emitting a series of clicks and whistling sounds. Grrghracksh then pointed upwards with the pad as though directing the signal through the ceiling.

"I think he wants to phone home." said one of the technicians. "He wants us to link his device to the communications array and send a signal into space that will probably bring a whole load more of his kind to Phorissi."

Shhti Jaad thought about this for a second or two and without taking her eyes off the intruder, she sat in the closest chair and folded her arms. Grrghracksh's expression didn't change as he reached towards the group of scientists with the speed of an insect and grabbed one of them by the scruff of the neck; not the one who had spoken though, he seemed to be the smart one so would probably be useful at a later stage. He pulled the hapless boffin towards him and placed his hand over the top of his head, and with a gentle flick of his wrist and without a single change in expression, he snapped the poor fellow's neck and allowed him to fall to the floor. Shhti Jaad tried not to show any emotion, but it was impossible to completely cover her horror at the sight that had just unfolded before her. Grrghracksh once again pointed towards the banks of computers with his comms pad and when the obstinate little creature still refused to acquiesce, he looked around for another victim, but they'd all scarpered to the far corners of the room, so he pulled the pulse rifle from his side and pointed it at the creature that was furthest away from the delicate electronics. Shhti Jaad jumped from her seat and shouted, "OK!" With his weapon still trained on the scientist, he handed the comms pad to Shhti who took it with both hands and with a single move that was too fast for Grrghracksh to prevent, threw it as hard as she could to the floor. As it was her first encounter with Throgloid technology, she could have been forgiven for assuming that it would smash into tiny pieces as it impacted with the cold stone floor and the scientist in the far corner of the room would have probably forgiven her as his body vaporised, knowing that she had just saved the entire moon from destruction. But it didn't smash to pieces. Instead, a small crack appeared in the surface of the floor where it had hit.

Grrghracksh bent down and picked it up, selected a new target for the pulse rifle and offered the comms pad to Shhti once more and at that precise moment, every piece of electronic equipment in the control room went blank. Every screen turned off and the myriad lights on the panels simply blinked out of existence.

A total moon-wide electronic blackout occurred as Arnus stared skyward in disbelief. This time Malrey and Tibras were with him to witness the formation of the vertical tornado in the sky. But this time, something rather more substantial than a pod was emerging.

Oli had flown Cranus into the bridge vortex at minimum velocity. Robbie warned him that they had no idea what lay on the other side of the bridge and if they entered with too much inertia, they could fly straight into the side of a planet. As they travelled through the rift in space-time, everything became rather atypical to say the least. The bridge of Cranus elongated and Oli watched as his friends disappeared into the distance. He could just make them out about five hundred metres away, and shouted after them down the narrow tunnel that was the bridge. Even the controls on the side of his seat that he was gripping onto with all his finger strength, ended up where the far side of the bridge had been, but he still had control of the ship because his arms had stretched away from him with the controls. He watched his nose expand to a size that would have embarrassed an African elephant.

“Don’t ... worry ... Oli.” came a guttural drawn-out voice that he assumed must have belonged to Robbie.

“It’s ... just ... the ... distortion ... of ... time ... within ... the ... star ... bridge.”

Then as soon as it had begun, the effect began to reverse. His arms re-joined his body much to Oli’s delight and the star-shaped consul hurtled back towards him with the crew intact, if slightly bamboozled. Now that he could see the screen once more, Oli could make out a similar vortex to the one into which they had flown inside the sun, except that it spiralled in on itself so that they were heading for the point of the effect.

The front of Cranus nudged into the spinning point of whatever it was, and it began to fold around the structure of the ship like tendrils of a creeper seeking a purchase point. It was at this moment that they felt a surge as the vortex gripped the hull and began to pull it through to whatever was waiting to greet them on the other side.

“This is nothing like before,” said Arnus, as the three of them watched the giant tornado begin to collapse in on itself. Whereas before the tail had careered down from the edge of space to spit the pod into the forest in an explosion of colour, this time the spinning cloud seemed to be almost straining to pull something extremely heavy out from nowhere.

Ed briefly changed the view on the screen to look down the length of the ship. Thousands of tiny bolts of blue lightning were erupting from the superstructure as the spinning cloud made its way along the hull, and behind Cranus, the space was jet black. There could be nothing in the universe that was blacker. No stars were shining in the distance and there was no sign of the entrance to the space bridge. Everyone was silent as they realised together that they were truly a long way from home. Ed switched the view back to the front just in time to take in an expanse of red as far as the eye could see.

“Pull up!” he shouted, but Oli was already pulling the joystick back as far as it would go. The front of the ship had exited the vortex and was diving at an angle of forty-five degrees towards the red forest below. Oli estimated that the tops of the trees were no further than half a kilometre away and closing fast, but even with the pitch control pulled back to its limit, the attitude of the great ship remained constant. The rear half of Cranus was still exiting the bridge vortex and any directional control was being cancelled out.

More and more of the giant craft oozed from the spinning cloud, like a giant tube of tooth paste being squeezed onto the forest canopy. The ground around Arnus and his parents began to rumble as retro thrusters fired from the underside of the ship. It was surely going to crash into the forest and result in the biggest explosion that anyone had ever seen, but the urge to run for cover was overpowered by Arnus and his parent’s desire to witness the event in its entirety. Had the giant monster managed to contact its friends? Was this the start of an alien invasion that would spell doom for their civilisation?

Arnus suddenly remembered his camera and swung his back-pack from his shoulder. Reaching inside, he pulled the camera out and began snapping away. Then suddenly, the spinning cloud expanded in all directions, allowing the precipice-like rear section of the ship to emerge but instead of collapsing as it had done when Grrghracksh came through, the vortex remained in the sky. The tail had disappeared, but the cloud formation continued to spin at a reduced rate, taking on the appearance of something quite magical.

Julie punched-in full reverse on all forward-facing ion thrusters when Oli felt the rear of the ship release from the grip of the vortex, but Cranus’ underbelly had already reached the canopy and everyone winced as they heard the sound of metre-wide branches scraping down the hull. It reminded Oli of the time when he had sat in on one of Sara’s first driving lessons. She’d driven the car out of her parent’s driveway with her rather concerned-looking father in the passenger seat and turned the wheel a little too soon. The sound of her dad’s gleaming new car scraping along the brick pillar resulted in a similar grinding-of-his-teeth sound that was resulting from crashing the five hundred thousand ton Cranus into a

forest. The nose was slowly responding to Oli's input, but the ship was still heading deeper into the trees.

Robbie was working away furiously beneath the control inputs of the crew. He didn't want to belittle their efforts, but he could after all generate ten thousand instructions for every one of theirs. He tried to halt the progress of the ship with a short burst of Graviton energy, but the Graviton Generators were off-line. They'd been knocked out by the colossal gravitational forces within the vortex and for all his efforts, he could not restart them. All twenty thousand ion drives were at maximum power, but Cranus was not designed to land on the surface of a massive object. Its technical specifications allowed for a gravitational acceleration of no more than 2.3 metres per second.

"Brace for impact!" shouted Robbie. For the first time since Oli had met him, he sounded slightly concerned. Robbie increased the power to the forward and underside shielding, and increased the impenetrable force field surrounding the Graviton Generators to double impenetrable. He also surrounded the bridge in a similar field so that if the ship did break up, at least the crew would survive. He also sent a backup version of his personality and memories to Annia, which he also surrounded in a force field. He couldn't protect the entire mass of Cranus from a devastating impact with a planet, but he could at least provide the crew and himself with a chance of returning home.

From their viewing position outside the little house, the thunderous noise of Cranus entering the forest, demolishing several kilometres of giant trees as it progressed, was deafening. They watched in disbelief as the alien ship was devoured by the forest until nothing showed above the canopy. A massive dust cloud erupted into the sky as the ship hit the ground, but there was no explosion. The cacophony subsided and only the cloud of dust remained, suspended in mid-air as a reminder of what had just taken place.

Arnus placed his camera back inside his backpack, picked up his bow-saw from the garden table and ran towards the garden gate.

"Where do you think you're going, young man?" shouted Tibras, reaching out to grab one of the shoulder straps on Arnus' backpack, causing him to halt rapidly and swing around to face his father.

"Oh Daaaaaad," Arnus whined, still struggling to release himself from his father's grip. "They might be hurt ... they might need our help ... IT'S AN ALIEN SHIP!" he shouted, half expecting his father to be as excited as he was about the prospect of being the first Phorissians to inspect the massive craft.

"Yes, and that huge ship might be filled to the brim with water-hog-eating monsters. We're going into the shelter and we're not coming out until this is all over."

Tibras placed his hand on Arnus' back and guided him towards the veranda, gently pushing him with his fingers curled through the strap to convey his resoluteness. But as Arnus reached the wooden platform surrounding the front of the house, he slipped out from the backpack, ducked away from his father's grasp and bolted towards the wooden railing at the edge of the veranda.

"Arnus!" shouted Tibras and Malrey together, but they could only watch as Arnus vaulted the fence with his legs above his head, spun through the air landing on his feet and ran as fast as he could towards the forest. He turned his head as he was running and mouthed the word sorry to his distraught parents.

"That boy!" huffed Tibras, stomping inside to pick up his rifle. "He gets more and more like you every day." He slung the rifle over his shoulder and hugged Malrey who was watching Arnus disappear into the forest with tears in her eyes. "That's why I love him so much," he continued, planting a soft kiss on her cheek then setting off towards the forest at a more middle-aged pace.

As Arnus approached the crash site, the devastation became apparent. The forest floor was strewn with broken branches and smaller pieces of smashed tree. There was light up ahead, so he headed towards it, but as he approached the obvious clearing, the way became more chaotic, as he was forced to clamber over larger and larger pieces of desiccated tree. Some of the trees had been thrown sideways and were lying at precarious angles against un-felled trees. He kept a watchful eye on these just in case they decided to suddenly continue their journey towards the ground. As he approached the edge of the clearing, his view was blocked by one of the giant trees lying flat on its side; an unpassable wall marking the edge of the forest. He had to get on top of that tree to get any idea of the ship's final resting place, so he reached up, put his fingers in the rough bark and pulled his weight up to get his first foot-hold. He'd scaled the fallen trunk of the tree many times before he'd cut the steps into the side, so within no time he was pulling himself flat onto the top of the trunk. He raised his head and breathed a sigh as he looked across the two hundred metres of perfectly flat trunks to the edge of the forest on the other side of the clearing. Then his head darted to the left and the view increased in open-jaw factor by at least five hundred.

Cranus had laid flat a perfectly straight line of trees for three kilometres before finally coming to a halt. At the end of the newly created sea of trees sat the towering rear of the ship, as high as a block of flats. The ship had stripped all the branches from the trees and the scene reminded Arnus of a logging operation that he'd once seen in a book. He began to run along the trunk of the tree towards Cranus. When the tree began to thin and move below the height of the next trunk, he leapt across the gap and landed on the slight incline, gripping the bark with both hands. He scrambled to the zenith once more then continued along the next trunk till it was time to transfer once more. In this way, he made his way towards the stricken alien ship and as he approached closer and closer, the tree trunks flattened out and became easier to negotiate and the scale of the vessel became apparent.

He now stood just a few metres from the vertical wall, looking up at the immovable obstruction to his progress. The wall was completely flat with not a single hand-hold in sight. He would have to find a way around. He moved to the left side of the wall, where he discovered that the flattened trees at the very edge of the clearing had retained their round structure. The top of the nearest fallen trunk was almost level with the lower edge of the curving top of the ship, so he climbed the tree and walked along it until he found a suitable place to jump up to the hull. There was no way that he could have climbed the almost-vertical side of the ship, but he found a grill that ran from the edge up to a point where the hull began to level out. It was a perfect ladder and all he had to do was make the leap of faith from the top of the tree, grab the bottom part of the grill with his hands because it was too high to get a foot on, then pull himself up. He stood looking at the imposing leap for a while, practicing his jump in his somewhat agitated mind and imagining which part of the grill he would aim for. His mind also provided him, unfortunately, with a detailed elucidation of how events would unfold should he miss the grill. He would fall between the ship and the flattened tree, bouncing off them both till he came to a rather painful end on the ground. There was no way imaginable that he could fall down the gap and avoid serious injury, so he had to get it right first time. He was always good at climbing trees from an early age and Malrey would watch in terror as he clambered higher and higher. From where did he get his fearlessness? she would ask; it certainly wasn't from her, and Tibras was renowned for his safety. It wasn't as though he'd gone without injury all these years. He was always falling and gouging great lumps of skin from his arms and legs. He'd even broken more than an average amount of bones in his short time on Phorissi. But still he pushed the boundaries.

One last deep breath and with a little backward lean onto his back foot he launched himself across the dark foreboding abyss. He yelped as his wrists impacted the grill but still managed to get a grip on the second row of bars. He hung there for a few seconds gathering

his strength then with all his might, pulled himself up so that he could quickly release one hand and grab the next grill. His feet skidded on the smooth hull in a vain attempt to find grip. He repeated the strenuous task three times before he could curl his leg under himself and push his body completely onto the grill. Between gasps of breath and beats of his heart that threatened to explode from his chest he rested against the precipitous slope of the hull, grinning like a grinning thing till he was ready to continue the considerably easier climb to the top.

When he reached the end of the grill, the hull had levelled out and he could see along the length of the ship. Behind him were the bulges of the three Graviton Generators, silenced by the vortex and ahead was the one-kilometre-long spacecraft that had fallen from the sky and levelled six hundred thousand square metres of forest. The hull wasn't flat but had many protrusions in the shape of bulges and dish arrays. A twenty-metre-long tower lay flat across the deck where a tree limb had smashed into it. In the distance, about halfway along the hull, he could see a jagged edge across the width of the ship. From this distance, it looked as though the hull had split in two. Arnus began to walk towards the front stopping every now and then to peer through windows in the superstructure buildings, but he saw no signs of life.

As he approached the jagged gash, his suspicions were confirmed; the ship had broken its back. He edged towards the metre-wide gap and looked inside. Through several layers of metal and twisted wiring he saw a cavernous space filled with machinery. The huge space must have occupied a large portion of the height of the ship, but still no sign of any monsters. He jumped across the gap and continued forward, passing an amphitheatre-shaped bowl in the hull and finally reaching the front of the ship, where the hull began to slope towards the ground. The trees towered above him, defiantly resisting the destruction that had met so many of their kin.

A soft psst sound from behind startled him and he turned in time to see five figures emerge from inside the ship on a platform. They all had their backs to Arnus and were looking down the length of the ship. Four of them looked normal, with arms and legs, but the fifth was just a blank grey figure.

"Ooops!" said the figure with an unruly bush of fur on its head.

"Massive oops indeed!" said the higher pitched voice of another.

"Thank you for flying Oaf Air, we do hope you enjoyed your flight." said Ed.

Arnus didn't have a clue what they were saying, but they certainly seemed more approachable than the last creature that fell from the sky, so he coughed lightly to attract their attention.

The crew spun around as one, and stood silently staring at Arnus.

"Robbie?" said Oli eventually, "Am I seeing things or is that an Annenian standing on Cranus' roof?" Oli had spent enough time gazing through the glass lid of Shtelar's hibernation pod to recognise the slightly larger and oval-shaped eyes of an Annenian. The perfectly smooth alabaster skin interrupted by the tiniest of noses and the bald head, as perfectly smooth as the surface of an egg.

"I don't mind admitting in this instance," said the drone, "that I have no explanation whatsoever for the fact that a seventeen-year-old Annenian boy is standing before us. I'm launching a probe into space to analyse the star formations and get a fix on our position."

They all twisted their necks as a probe left the confines of its launch tube near to the rear of the ship and disappeared into the sky.

"What's your name?" asked Robbie in Annenian. The words were simultaneously translated through everybody's Go-ring, directly into their brains.

"Arnus," replied the slightly shaky voice. He raised a hand and said, "Hello."

“Sorry about your forest,” said Oli, but was shocked to hear Annenian words coming from his mouth. “I didn’t know I could speak Annenian,” he said ... in Annenian.

“What’s Annenian?” asked Arnus. “This is Phorissi. We speak Phorissian.”

“I’ve been teaching you Annenian during your sleep,” said Robbie. “But I never thought in a million galactic years that you would ever be using it to talk to an actual Annenian.”

“What’s Annenian?” repeated Arnus. These people were speaking a version of his language, but they were certainly not from Phorissi.

“This is way too complicated to explain through words,” said Robbie. A hatch opened in the front of the drone and it pulled out a mobile version of the Neural Feed Set. The drone took a step towards Arnus who immediately took a step back.

“Here, you give it to him,” said Robbie, handing the NFS to Oli.

“It’s OK,” said Oli, placing the NFS on his own temples. “You wear it like this and Robbie will explain everything in the blink of an eye.”

Arnus thought about it for a second or two and decided that he hadn’t come all this way to back down now. This was the adventure of a lifetime. He was making first contact with alien life ... for the second time! He took the NFS from Oli who was smiling inanely at him, placed it on his head and there was a green flash somewhere in the back of his eyes. Suddenly he knew about Earth, the impending devastation from its sun and the discovery of the star bridge. He knew of the existence of a race of beings called Annenians, to whom he was somehow related, and he knew about Oli being chosen by Robbie to save the planet Earth. He also knew with absolute certainty that these aliens meant neither him nor his people any harm. He removed the NFS and held out his index finger towards Oli. Obviously, some kind of greeting, thought Oli. He would show Arnus how they did things on planet Party Land. He reached out with both hands, pulled Arnus towards him and gave him the biggest Oli hug he could muster. At first, Arnus was a bit startled. That kind of embrace was usually reserved between adults, and usually in the confines of their house when they believed that the kids were in bed, but he rode with it and went along the line collecting hugs from everyone. When he reached the drone with open arms he gave a little huff, placed his arms back by his sides and turned back to Oli.

“Well you certainly seem nicer than the last alien that came through the tornado,” said Arnus, to looks of concern from the crew.

“What alien?” asked Robbie.

“Well I don’t like to be unkind, but it really was ugly and big. It had a massive sword and it’s been causing chaos since it got here. It’s killed dozens of Phorissians.

“Grrghracksh!” sighed Oli. “How did he manage to escape the explosion?”

“How did he come through? Was he alone?” asked Robbie, keen to ascertain whether they were dealing with one or more Throgloids.

“He was in a small cylinder, and yes he was on his own.”

“Where’s the pod now?”

Arnus pointed to the flattened trees stretching for three kilometres behind the ship. “Under there somewhere.”

“Do you have any idea where he is now?” Robbie was aware that he was firing question after question at the young Phorissian, but they had to stop Grrghracksh before he destroyed the planet.

“He attacked the space base near Torian. The last report on the radio said that he’d entered the base and was holding hostages inside. We’re about to launch our first manned rocket into space. It’s all very exciting.” He thought about it for a while and looked down the length of the massive spaceship, then added, “Although not for you, I don’t suppose.”

“Hostages?” asked Oli, “that doesn’t sound like the Grrghracksh that we all know and despise. What do you think he’s up to?”

“My guess is that he’ll try to send a signal to the rest of the fleet.” Robbie stopped for a second, obviously thinking about something. “But that’s going to be a little harder than he might have first thought. I’ve just received telemetry from the probe and we are located in the outer region of the Cygnus arm in the Milky Way galaxy. So that’s good news at least.” Robbie waited for any kind of agreement to his good news, but none were forthcoming and the toothless grin that had appeared on the drone’s face slowly faded.

“How exactly is it good news?” asked Sara. “Are we close to home by any chance?”

“Oh, good grief no!” Robbie smirked at Sara’s misunderstanding of the galaxy’s geography, as though he’d asked her where the Sailors Arms was located, and she didn’t know. He rapidly wiped the smirk from the usually expressionless face of the drone as Sara tilted her head to one side and looked at him through the tops of her eyes, not even the merest hint of amusement on her face.

“No ... Ah ... we’re about sixty thousand light years from Earth, so even at light 50, it would take us one thousand two hundred years to return by space. No, the good news is that we’re still in the same galaxy, but I am now fully aware judging by the looks on your faces that this is in fact not good news and I will therefore never mention it again.”

A little way along the top of Cranus, one of the communication disks whirred into action and pointed directly into the open star bridge. Less than a second later, Robbie said, “Oh, that’s not good.”

Everyone looked at the drone, willing Robbie to continue.

“I’m receiving Earth radio waves. Television, radio communication, in fact any signal that emanates from planet Earth is making its way through the open bridge to here. Which is fine. I’m sure the Phorissians would be delighted to be blessed with such classics as, The Jeremy Kyle Show or Eastenders, both of which show humans in a magnificent light. Maybe if they’re really lucky, a few episodes of X Factor will ooze through. No, the problem with this, is that if Earth radio waves can come in, then Grrghracksh’s signal can get out, which will lead the rest of the fleet straight to Earth.”

“Can’t we shut the bridge?” asked Julie.

“No, I’m afraid that it is in some unfathomable way, still attached to Cranus and drawing power from the Generators. The only way to close it would be to destroy Cranus and I’m not sure the Phorissians would enjoy the outcome of that particular action.”

“Well, we have to stop Grrghracksh from making that signal then,” said Oli. He looked at Arnus as they all gathered together on the lift pad, held out his hand and said, “Coming?”

A grin the size of Amphora spread across Arnus’ face.

USELESS ROBOT

“We’ve lost the stereo ahead satellite,” said Nick, as Professor Jiaying Wong came running from her office.

The ahead satellite was currently orbiting one hundred and twenty degrees further around the sun than the Earth and it had a ring-side seat for the latest Coronal Mass Ejection. A little bit too ring-side as it happened. They were watching the eruption in real-time minus the nine minutes that the signal required to reach them, at the Goddard Space Flight Centre. Then just a few minutes later, the screen went blank as the electronics on the satellite were fried. The next eruption would send the two-hundred-million-dollar charred carcass hurtling through space on a journey that would take it further than any man-made husk of charred metal had ever travelled.

Professor Wong had been in contact with President Daniels, who couldn’t believe his luck. Two potentially Earth-destroying events in one term of office! Why couldn’t he have presided over a nice quiet period, where everyone would believe that it was his hard work that led to the utopian lifestyle that they were experiencing? Instead, he had to come to office just in time to see a meteorite the size of Texas heading for the Earth, and now the Sun deciding to go completely mental and threaten all life on the planet. The syndicate of oil tycoons had assured him that if they got him into the White House, all he would have to do was sign a few bits of paper and play golf with some of their Arab buddies. He slumped back into his chair and imagined sitting in his favourite rocking chair on the porch of his Texas ranch, watching the sun set behind the imposing shape of the Guadalupe Peak Mountains.

Obviously, there was the chance that the eruptions would cease long before they presented any danger to the planet, so once again he put a tight seal on the information.

Professor Wong had no objection to being confined to the office. After all, she spent most of her waking hours devoted to her job. She didn’t even object to having her mobile phone taken from her. But she didn’t see the point of the two burley armed guards that were stationed outside the lab. She protested strongly, but might as well have been singing God Save the Queen in its original German for all the good that it did.

Before the satellite had bitten the dust, they had measured the diameter of the solar wind as it spread, cone-shaped away from the Sun. When it reached the orbital path of the Earth, the outer reaches of the effect had a diameter of two million kilometres of space.

Nick was tapping away furiously on his keyboard, his left leg keeping rhythm with his fingers, and after a few minutes he presented Professor Wong with an animated simulation showing when they could expect to feel the first influences on Earth.

“Even at the extremities of the solar wind, the speed and density of the charged particles will seriously affect satellite communication. GPS will probably go down, mobile phones will become redundant.” He pressed a key that scrolled through the timeline in six-hourly intervals and the image of the sun rotated, bringing the funnel of destruction with it. Nick halted the animation as the edge of the funnel crossed the Earth’s orbit.

“Cao!” Professor Wong put her hand to her mouth as she read the date and time displayed on the screen. “Lixia,” she said under her breath.

“What’s Lixia?” asked Nick.

“May the sixth,” she explained pointing at the date on the screen. “The Chinese start of summer. That’s just five days from now. At midday on the sixth of May, assuming the sun continues with its eruptions, it’s going to be one hell of a start to the summer.”

Nick continued to scroll through the time-line until the Earth was positioned in the centre of the funnel.

He pointed to the date on the screen. “Yes, and if it continues till May the eleventh ... well we can’t be certain what will happen because we’ve never witnessed the effect of an X80.” He emphasised the X80 by pointing to the magnitude scale of the previous ejection. “Nothing this powerful has ever been witnessed before, but my guess is that it’s going to be a bad day to be anywhere except ten or twenty kilometres below the Earth’s surface.”

Professor Wong contacted the President once more to relay the latest findings.

“We’ll have to ground all aircraft throughout the world on the morning of the fifth of May, Mister President. Furthermore, we must transport as much data concerning the economic administration of the world as far below ground as possible. With regard to the population; well, caves, underground train lines, even sewers may offer some protection. I’m afraid we just don’t know for sure. Communications will almost certainly be lost within the first two days and power grids will need to be shut down for the duration, to prevent worldwide transformer failure. I’m sorry Mister President, that I cannot be more specific, but we’re heading into an area of which we have little or no experience.”

President Daniels put the phone down and began to rock gently in his chair, thinking how to play this global catastrophe. There was no point in panicking everyone unnecessarily, sending the world into an out-of-control barrel roll of looting and violence. If the worst-case scenario did unfold, then he would give them enough time to find a place deep underground, of course not with him, his family and staff in the atomic bomb-proof bunker deep under the White House. They would have to cram into the subways and sewers. He didn’t fully understand what these solar flares were or why they presented such a danger to the planet, but he fully understood the possible effects of mass hysteria on his chances of re-election.

Annia lifted off from the shattered hull of Cranus, to the delight of their latest recruit. As they flew along the length of the great ship, Robbie hovered over the crack in the hull.

“Is that fixable?” asked Oli.

“It’ll probably T-cut out,” Robbie replied, then waited a few seconds for the ludicrous comment to sink in.

“What’s T-cut?” asked Sara, thinking that it was some amazing Annenian tech that could magically glue two halves of a one-kilometre long spaceship back together.

“No, in answer to your question Oli,” continued Robbie. “To use a modern parlance and in my professional and humble opinion ... it’s caput. We have to accept the fact that Cranus and all the machinery within, will be remaining here when we close the space bridge.”

For the first time since meeting Robbie, Oli felt completely helpless. He could feel his eyes moistening as he thought about abandoning Cranus. Everything inside the ship was to be the legacy of the Annenian race, handed down to humanity when they eventually showed themselves to be worthy of the gift. He’d been chosen to look after the great ship, to guard the secrets within and present them to humanity at some time in the future, thus launching his race forward to their next evolutionary step, and he’d stacked it into a forest. He started to feel sad for the first time since his mother passed away.

“Look!” shouted Arnus, pointing excitedly at the screen. “Down there on the fallen trees. That’s my dad!”

Tibras had managed to climb onto the fallen trees, taking considerably longer than his young, agile son and was making his way slowly towards Cranus. He stopped and looked directly into his son’s eyes as Annia appeared over the engine bulges. The small black craft dropped to a few metres above the fallen trees and headed straight for him. Tibras unslung his

ancient rifle from his shoulder and pointed it at the craft. He'd witnessed the power of the monster's weapons first hand, but he was out in the open with nowhere to run. He would have to make a stand.

The ship stopped about ten metres away from him, turned sideways and hovered silently just above the trees. He couldn't believe that there was no engine noise, nor was there any wash from the wind that it must surely create to stay in the air. This was alien to Tibras in every way, but still he stood fast, his rifle pointed at the ship. He could see the end of the barrel shaking and fought hard within himself to control his fear. Then a section of the hull opened, and he immediately lowered his weapon as the barrel pointed at his only son, Arnus.

"Hi Dad," said Arnus, with a little wave of his hand. "These people are friends." He was joined in the open doorway by four strange-looking creatures. Tibras felt a certain relief in the fact that they were in no way as terrifying as the other creature.

"They speak Phorissian and they're here to stop the monster."

"Would you like a ride home?" asked Oli.

"Ah ... no, thank you," replied a very confused Tibras. "I think I need to walk, it'll give me time to let all of this sink in."

"OK, but don't worry about Arnus. He'll be safe with us. The door started to close and Arnus shouted through the gap to his father, "Tell Mum I'm fine!" He threw his arms in the air and shouted, "This is the best thing that's ever happened!"

The door closed, and the little ship spun through one hundred and eighty degrees and disappeared silently over the tops of the trees at a speed that Tibras had never seen, leaving him standing there with his rifle in his hand and a million questions in his head. Still, at least they wouldn't be short of firewood for a few years, he thought, as he took in the scene of devastation around him.

The emergency lighting kicked in instantaneously as the power was cut. The entire underground section of the launch facility had its own back-up generator for just such an eventuality; the engineers would not last long down there without air. The control panels sparked back into life and computers began resetting themselves.

Grrghracksh, who had placed his giant hand around Commander Jaad's neck as the room went dark, calmly released his grip and offered her the transmitter. With his other hand, he located another willing volunteer for vapourisation. She snatched the device from his plate-sized open palm and placed it on the console next to a microphone on the end of a bendy straw. She pulled the microphone down so that it rested just above the transmitter and pressed a button on the console. Lights began to flash in time to the beeps and clicks displaying the level of signal being transmitted. Grrghracksh sauntered over to Shhti, staring down at the minute creature, lent across her and placing the largest dial on the console between two fingers, turned the transmit power to "max", then as the devious grin spread across his great expanse of face, he disappeared.

To general looks of anxiety, Oli took Annia's controls and skimmed the treetops towards the capital city of Torian. No one had been in the ship within an atmosphere with Oli at the controls yet, and they were planted firmly in their seats with their finger-tips clawing at the upholstery. But for Arnus, this was all just part of the amazing day that was continuing to unfold before him and for all he knew, Oli was the ship's pilot with years of experience and thousands of flying hours under his belt, so he sat in Jay's seat glued to the screen and cheered every time that Oli brushed the top of a giant fir or banked around the canopy of a particularly unruly giant blackwood.

The nervous silence was broken by Robbie. “Grrghracksh is transmitting his emergency signal,” he said. “I’m jamming as much of it as I can, but I’m afraid that some of the signal may just make it through the bridge. The good news is that it’s travelling on a sub-galactic carrier wave and will take many years to reach Throgloid space; the bad news is you’re about to fly straight into a rocky outcrop; Oli!”

The ship performed a split-second ninety-degree turn, narrowly avoiding the sheer cliff face, that by Oli’s account, had appeared out of nowhere, and smoothly came to a halt at the edge of the forest. As Oli wiggled the controls backwards and forwards trying to override the obvious malfunction that had occurred, a soft exhale whispered around the control room and the blood flowed back into the extremities of everyone’s hands.

“I think it would be prudent to inform the Phorissians of our imminent arrival. I have a Commander Shhti Jaad from inside the launch control centre.”

As the image of Commander Jaad appeared on the screen, Arnus jumped from his seat and shouted, “I know her! She’s in charge of guarding the rocket. She’s really nice.” He gave a little too much away with the last few words and Julie looked across the control room at him with a knowing smile on her face.

“Well, best you talk to her then,” said Oli, beckoning for Arnus to approach the screen.

“Ah ... hello, Commander Jaad ... mamm ... er ... ah ... how are you?”

OK, thought Julie, she was obviously really pretty, and she looked particularly hot in that uniform, but she was old enough to be his mother. She realised that she was frowning at Arnus. She would have to have a little chat with him at some quiet moment.

“Arnus?” asked Commander Jaad, obviously taken aback by the appearance of the young Phorissian on this completely secure communication line.

Arnus took a deep breath, composed himself and then spoke.

“I’m here in an alien ship with some really nice aliens, not at all like the other creature, you know ... the one that drools and slobbers everywhere. They’ve come to help us get rid of him and they’re really nice. Ah ... Commander?”

“He’s gone,” said Commander Jaad, and relayed the tale of how they had been held captive in the bunker and how he made them send the signal.

“Yes, about that,” interjected Robbie. “Do you suppose that you could possibly find your way to turning it off now?”

She disappeared off the side of the screen and the signal ceased. She re-appeared on the screen and told Arnus how one second, the creature had been towering over her, its foul breath tumbling through her hair and the next second it was gone, not a trace remaining. She was initiating the opening of the bunker and the release of the surviving scientists. She neglected to mention the communication device left behind by the creature, figuring that Arnus’ new friends would probably want to purloin it. She could win some major bonus points by presenting it to the Academy for testing. She could feel the promotion winging its way towards her.

“How do you reckon he did that then?” asked Oli, not remembering one single example of teleportation mentioned in any of the history transfers.

“For the second time in as many hours, I must confess to not having a Scooby,” said Robbie, obviously shaken by the experience. “Teleportation was theorised on many occasions and several sort-of-successful experiments were carried out. The Annenians managed to transmit a tagged hydrogen molecule from ship to ship, but anything more complex would always rearrange itself during transition. Obviously, it was never tried on any living matter. Even if the Throgloids had managed by some miracle to invent something that had eluded the finest minds throughout the Annenian system, which I can guarantee they

would not have, we're fifty thousand light years from any Throgloid ships. It just doesn't make ..."

"It just doesn't make what?" asked Ed, waking from a temporary slumber that he'd somehow slipped into whilst Oli was trimming the forest canopy. "What the ...?" He jumped out of his seat, or rather jumped out of the shape that his seat had previously occupied. He was stood in a room the same size as the control room, looking at his rather mystified ship-mates.

"Wherethehellarewe?" asked Sara, searching her surroundings for anything familiar.

"Robbie?" Asked Oli. "What's going on?"

The faint throbbing sound of the Graviton Generator had ceased. There was no control panel and no screen with which to see outside the ship. Then from a dark corner of the room, if in fact it was a room, they heard a clicking sound and two dim white lights appeared at about head height. There followed a mechanical whirring sound and the loud clunk of metallic footsteps. The crew took a collective step backwards as a two-metre-tall robot emerged from the shadows. There was nothing elegant about it as it hobbled across the floor trying desperately to come to terms with its own mechanisms. It stopped a few paces from the crew and looked blankly towards them. After a short while, during which they stared at it staring at them, it spoke.

The voice was synthetic, metallic and mono-tonal and it spoke every syllable as though it were a separate word, but there was no mistaking the thought processes behind it.

"Make that three times to-day. I have no i-de-a what is go-ing on or why I am in this bu-cket of bolts."

"Robbie?" Oli leant forward and peered into the faint glow of the eyes expecting to see some evidence of his friend, but rather like his mother's golden retriever Max, it didn't matter how hard he looked, there was absolutely no indication that any sentient awareness was currently in residence. The metallic, 1970s science fiction movie voice continued.

"I have lost con-tact with the ship and the Pho-ris-si-ans, I could not ev-en tell you for cer-tain whe-ther or not we are still on the moon."

It was taking poor Robbie twice the amount of time as usual to express himself and he was aware that everyone around him was losing interest long before the end of his discourse. The fact that everyone was so bewildered was not filling Arnus with any degree of confidence and he began to sob. Julie took him by the shoulders with both hands and spoke softly whilst staring into his almond-shaped dark eyes.

"Whatever is going on, you mustn't worry. Robbie will fix it and we'll get back to the ship before you can say I fancy the police commander." She passed him a knowing wink and Arnus smiled. It was all he needed to break him away from his anxiety.

Robbie was trying to come to terms with his floppy arms that looked like a couple of elongated accordions with barbeque tongues for hands. As he flapped them around clapping the barbeque tongues like an angry lobster, he realised that his so-called friends had all turned away from him and their shoulders were jiggling about in unison. "I'm glad that you find this fun-ny." He had more to say but the first part took so long to spell out that even he couldn't be bothered with completing the thought.

"Hello!" Sara shouted at the top of her voice, causing the rest of the crew to skip a superfluous heartbeat.

"Is anybody there?" Her voice reverberated around the space, which suddenly appeared to be considerably larger than they had first assumed. Then as the dying echo of her melodious tones faded into the distance, they heard faint footsteps coming towards them from the dark. They were most definitely not what one might call normal sounding footsteps. There were two steps in rapid succession followed by a short pause then repeated, again and

again. The feet that were behind the irregular perambulation sounded more like flippers and made slapping sounds as they hit the floor. Everyone stared intently into the gloom as the steps came closer, expecting anytime to see the owner of the flipper feet. It sounded as though the walker was right next to them, but no one appeared; then the footsteps stopped.

“Ahem,” came a sound of someone clearing their throat from behind the group. They spun round and peered into the non-descript gloom in the other direction. Still nothing.

“Ahem.”

This time they realised that the sound was coming from somewhere nearer to the floor and as one, they looked down. There in front of them, standing about half a metre tall was the oddest-looking creature they had ever seen, and they’d all been to Glastonbury on several occasions, so they were well versed in the concept of odd-looking.

The main part of the creature was taken up by a pear-shaped body separated from the floor by two stubby little legs that in turn entertained two completely out-of-proportion flippers. No wonder it had trouble walking, thought Ed. The flippers were twice the width of the body. The ends of the flippers were frayed and jagged, like rags on a street urchin. Joining the top of the pear-shaped body at the narrow end was a conical head ending in a point that could have speared a house fly. A small expressionless mouth puckered slightly, giving the impression that it wanted to snog someone, and the two dark, bulbous eyes, positioned on either side of the conical head were obviously examining its guests. It wasn’t possible at this juncture to determine whether it was wearing clothes or whether the texture covering its unusual body was actually its skin.

“Now, what do we have here?” said the little creature, pulling a small electronic device from behind its back. It started tapping away furiously and pointing the device at various parts of the crew. A frown appeared across the top of its perfectly smooth head and it tapped a few more commands into the device.

The little creature turned its head through about one hundred and twenty degrees, which looked decidedly unnatural, and shouted, “Honey, I think you’d better come take a look at this.” Its head snapped back round to look at the assembled crew and after a few seconds the sound of another set of irregular flipper steps approached from the gloom beyond. The crew were too dumbfounded to even attempt to communicate with the creature and so the four of them, Arnus, Robbie the rubbish mechanoid, and the little creature just stood there staring at each other waiting for the arrival of the one called Honey. The little creature continued to tap away on its keypad, looking up every now and then to frown, shake its head and shake the device, as though it couldn’t quite believe the information that it was receiving. Eventually, the other creature arrived and as it stood next to the first oddity, everyone’s eyes darted from one to the other. It was like one of those competitions where you had to find ten discrepancies between two seemingly identical pictures, except that there were no variations whatsoever. The two creatures were identical, right down to the irregular shape at the end of their flippers.

The first creature showed Honey the readout on the electronic device and this was greeted by an identical level of confusion on the face of the latter. The creature pressed a few buttons far too rapidly for any eyes to follow and held out the device towards the crew as the holographic image of a blue and green planet that they knew all too well, appeared above the device.

“That’s Earth!” said Sara, thus winning for the third year in succession the award for stating the bleeding obvious.

“You are from here?” asked Honey. They all nodded. Well, all except for Arnus, who had never seen that planet before in his life, and Robbie the rubbish mechanoid, because he wasn’t even sure if his tin head was capable of such a coordinated movement.

Oli stepped forward and dropped to one knee in front of the identical twins, offering his hand to the first creature. "Hi, I'm Oli. It's very nice to meet you both."

The creature lent forward to inspect the hand and Oli noticed the gill-like fans on either side of its head. They began drawing in sharp intakes of air, and Oli realised that the creature was smelling him. Fortunately, he'd had a quick matrem that morning, for surely there could be nothing worse than making first contact with a new species smelling like a rented mule.

"It's an Earth greeting," offered Oli, by way of an explanation. He held his palm open and said, "You put your hand in mine and we shake each other's hands in a gesture of friendship."

The diminutive alien gave an almost imperceptible shrug of its virtually non-existent shoulders and placed its tiny, eight-fingered hand into Oli's. Oli gently closed his hand around the extremely soft and baby-like limb and gave it a delicate shake.

"There," said Oli. "Now we're friends."

"How exciting!" said the little creature. "We're the Gooerd. We've never had a friend before. In fact, we've never known anyone except us for as long as we can remember."

Oli introduced the rest of the crew and they all gathered around their unusual hosts, but all the time he could sense Robbie creaking away in the background.

"Oh, and this is Robbie," he said, gesturing towards the rather miserable looking machine. "Well, not exactly Robbie. He appears to be trapped in an ancient robot." He lent closer to the Gooerd's head and whispered, "And I don't think he's very happy about it."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry about that. It was the only mechanical body that we had to hand, and we had to put your artificial friend into something. We thought that he might like to wander about a bit for a change."

Oli looked over his shoulder to see if Robbie had heard the reason for his predicament, but he just stood there expressionless, with his ridiculous arms swaying gently like a pair of leggings on the washing line. Oli had to look away and cover his mirth.

"So, why are we here?" asked Julie sternly. It was all well and good making new friends and being all chummy with all living things, but they were on a bit of a tight schedule. The Earth was about to be fried to a crisp, Cranus was destroyed and Grrghracksh was running around somewhere trying to attract the attention of the rest of the Throgloid fleet to come and finish off their home, if there was anything left after the sun had finished with it. She felt that it was her job in the absence of a fully functioning Robbie, to step into the breach and get some answers.

"You shouldn't be here," said the Gooerd, very matter-of-factly. "This civilization on this moon shouldn't be here," continued the other Gooerd. "Nothing is where it should be, so we brought you here to satisfy our curiosity."

The Gooerd pressed a couple of buttons on the keypad and instantly the surroundings changed. Oli and the crew had spent a good deal of time since meeting Robbie open-jawed and generally wowed by every new thing presented to them, but their jaws were about to discover new dimensions of openness. As the area lit up, they realised that they were in the centre of a massive circular cavern with what appeared to be giant ribs curving from the perimeter of the cavern to a point at least one hundred metres above their heads. The ribs didn't quite meet at the top but left a circular hole which was currently occupied by the gas giant, Amphora. The Gooerd pressed another button and the ribs began to open, fanning out like giant fingers, creating a skeletal bowl shape. They moved silently and with great speed, like a speeded-up film of a flower opening to greet the morning sun. Now all the light from distant stars flooded into this strange, empty cavern and everyone strained their necks to take in the incredible sight. To the side of Amphora was a colourful nebula, its tendrils stretching

out in all directions. The bright light from several new stars within the nebula illuminated the myriad colours within the cloud.

The Gooerd broke the silence. "This gas planet was passing us by and we realised that the moon was inhabited. Well, we certainly didn't seed it and since the odds of a planet self-seeding are so great as to be virtually impossible, we figured we'd better investigate."

There were far too many questions elicited by that one sentence. No one knew where to start or what to say next. Oli threw a look at Robbie, who simply lifted his arms in despair causing the wobbly barbeque tongues to flop around like wet fish. The Gooerd was obviously ready to continue with the explanation, even though most of it made no sense whatsoever.

"Well, on closer inspection we found the population to comprise one of our recipes, but from a planet in sector two sub-section eighty-nine, which we seeded one point six galactic revolutions ago. But then, conundrum atop conundrum ..." the Gooerd waved its right arm in a slightly amateur dramatic manner and continued. "Suddenly you turn up unannounced." The Gooerd pointed at Oli and the crew. "Well, you've barely unlocked sufficient genetic knowledge to allow you to leave the confines of your own planet, let alone create a working rift in space-time and travel to the far side of the Galaxy. Wrong, wrong, wrong! None of this is possible."

The Gooerds were becoming animated and they both began pacing about with their heads bowed, occasionally bumping into one another and immediately reversing direction, like an automated bumper car toy.

"And then there's that other revolting creature," said the Gooerd. "Well, if I might be permitted to point out that you were responsible for seeding that particular planet," stated the Gooerd called Honey, with a dismissive shake of its pointy head. Or was it the first Gooerd? All of their meanderings and bumping into one another had acted exactly like a round of the shell game, that some lightning-fingered conman would use to relieve honest folks of their hard-earned cash.

"Grrghracksh?" sighed Oli. "Where is he?"

"Oh, we didn't really want any more to do with that creature once it had tried to slice poor Honey here in two. We sent it straight back to its ship and erased any memory that it had of ever meeting us. I shouldn't imagine that that life form will turn out to be one of our success stories."

"So, let me see if I've got this right," said Oli, holding up a finger to halt the endless chatter from the little Gooerds. "You go around the galaxy seeding planets with life and if you didn't do this, it would be highly unlikely that any life would occur at all."

"No," said both Gooerds in unison, permitting each other a wry smile at the foolishness of the alien. "We don't go around the galaxy; the galaxy rotates past us! We are stationary relative to the centre of the galaxy, but due to gravitational forces, each circumnavigation brings us to a completely new area, so we never cover the same space twice."

Robbie began to speak and everyone including the Gooerds counted every syllable as they clunked out of his metal mouth. "And how ma-ny cir-cum-na-vi-gati-ons have you com-ple-ted?"

"We are half-way through our fifth galactic rotation," said the Gooerd.

"That's more than one bill-i-on Earth years," creaked Robbie.

"Yes, I suppose it would be if you're still measuring time in such an indigenous manner. But a lot of time is spent in interstellar space waiting for the next habitable planet to drift past, so we sleep a lot."

"How many of you are there on this ship?" asked Julie.

The Gooerd lifted the electronic device and tapped a few rapid commands into the keypad. And the full extent of the ship, if in fact it was a ship at all, became apparent. More sections of giant ribbed caverns lit up to the side, underneath, behind and in front of their position. The floor was completely transparent and as they looked down, they could see giant orbs made from these one hundred metre struts. Most of the ribbed orbs seemed to shimmer between the ribs as though they were holding back some kind of liquid. There could have been sections with more substance to them, but the edges of the ship were so far away that it was impossible to make out any detail.

“Just us two,” said the Gooerd by way of a delayed answer. “I was on my own for the first two revolutions, but I became slightly disconsolate with the manufacturing of complex life. My passion lies within the development of new and interesting florae. So, I cloned my own DNA and made a female version of myself, who loves writing complex code and ... if I may say; has a real talent for it.”

“Why thank you, George,” said Honey.

“So, did you make us?” asked Sara, not certain that she wanted to hear the answer. “Because I thought that the Annenians had done that.”

“Oh, gracious dear, no, no, no! We seed planets with the building blocks of life, basic organisms that over the period of hundreds of millions of years evolve into complex and hopefully intelligent life such as you, or just fizzle out depending on the multibillion factors of influence that can affect the development of life. You have no idea how exciting this is for us to meet two intelligent life forms that have evolved from our recipes.”

Honey took up the reins. “But we still need to establish how this civilization came to flourish half-way across the Galaxy. We place all the knowledge of the universe inside every living cell that we create. Even the most basic single-cell organism, technically speaking, contains all the wisdom of life. Evolution and the passage of galactic periods of time allows the knowledge to be released, but we have never placed any information about creating rifts in space-time within the genetic memory, because if every intelligent creature started tearing lacerations through space-time, it could seriously weaken the integrity of the universe. Once a rift has been established, it becomes a weak point and will open again at the merest hint of a trigger. This is what appears to have happened here.” the Gooerd addressed Arnus.

“The rift was created some fifty thousand of your years ago, in Sector two, sub-section eighty-nine.”

The Gooerd named George tapped a few buttons and a three-dimensional holographic image of the Milky Way galaxy appeared, occupying a large portion of the room. Using bright orange circles, the Gooerd pointed out the vast distance between the origin of the star bridge and the position of Phorissi.

“It was then immediately shut down, stranding the unfortunate travellers in a part of the galaxy from which they could never hope to return. And judging from the level of technology that you have achieved since arriving here, I would say that most, if not all of their knowledge was lost as your ancestors came through. It’s taken your race some fifty thousand of your years to re-establish a level of scientific expertise where you are about to begin your first venture into space.”

The Gooerds stepped forward and placed their tiny hands on Arnus’. “What a resilient creature you are,” said Honey, congratulating herself on a job well done.

The Gooerds turned their attention to Oli. “Now it would appear that somehow you created a rift,” adding as a private joke between them, “I would hazard a guess that it was accidental.” They allowed each other a chuckle before continuing. “And because of the proximity with Sector two sub-section eighty-nine, your rift latched onto the remaining fissure from the previous rift and brought you to exactly the same place.”

Oli felt that he'd better enlighten the Gooerds as to the problems that Earth was facing. Rather like the elderly lady at the counter of the post office, using the time with the clerk to make up for all the hours that she spent on her own, he felt that the Gooerds could continue rabbiting on until Earth passed by once more. He asked if they could help the crew get back through the bridge and close it behind them.

"By the way," he asked, suddenly having a terrible thought stampeding through his grey matter, "what ship? You said that you sent Grrghracksh back to his ship. Well as far as I can remember he doesn't have a ship."

"We sent him back to his little black ship at the edge of the forest just after we brought you here. Good riddance if you ask us."

"That's our ship, you numbnuts!" Julie realised that she'd just called the creators of all living things throughout the galaxy, numbnuts, but they had just given Grrghracksh the one thing that he desired more than anything and in doing so, stranded Oli and the crew on Phorissi for ever. Yes, she thought, numbnuts was pretty apt.

"Oh dear." said George, "I have been becoming a tad forgetful during the last one or two hundred million years. Don't worry though; I'll remove him from your ship immediately and drop him in the nearest star."

"No, you won't!" barked Oli. "You can't go around playing God with ..." He mused over that line of thought for a second or two and immediately change tack. But they couldn't leave Grrghracksh in Annia and they certainly couldn't put him back amongst the Phorissians to wreak havoc.

"Go on then." he said with a leaden voice. "Do what you have to do." There was no other option that he could see. Grrghracksh was just going to keep coming back like an irritating English cold. Plus, if he made it through the star bridge on Annia, then not only would they be stuck on Phorissi forever, but he would probably destroy every living thing on Earth.

Grrghracksh had a clear memory of being in the underground bunker with the puny creatures. He remembered sending the signal with the relief that had accompanied it, safe in the knowledge that his battle fleet would soon be en route. But where in the name of all that was brutal was he now? The seat in which he sat expanded to accommodate his ample rear and controls slid from the panel to rest next to his outstretched fingers. The screen that occupied most of the wall in front of him was displaying the edge of the forest that he'd spent several days traversing, and the rocket base lay some distance away towards the horizon. He was in a ship; of that there was no doubt. The ship was floating above the trees. A fact that also required no debate. But what ship? The technology looked way too advanced for the feeble-minded creatures that occupied this moon. He leant forward to inspect the controls more thoroughly.

"No!" he thought. "It couldn't be." These symbols were the same as the ones that they had found on the alien planet where he'd first seen the incredible little ship. His heart began to race as he contemplated the thought that he was sat inside the craft of his dreams. He looked up and saw the faint outline of a hatch just above his head. When he stood up from the seat, he could easily reach the control panel to the side of the opening. He pressed the large button in the middle and the section of ceiling dissolved into thin air. Grrghracksh reached up and gripped either side of the opening and pulled himself up so that his head protruded from the hole. He allowed himself to drop back into the room, slowly looked around at his surroundings and then erupted with great roars of laughter that violently vibrated the hull of the ship. He had no idea how, but he was inside the little ship and there

was no sign of the ugly but incredibly powerful creature that had destroyed his ship and crew. He sat back in the seat and inspected the controls. Following a certain amount of trial and error, fortunately coming down in favour of the trial rather than the error, he worked out how to make the craft move. After pulling back on the left stick, he ended up outside the atmosphere of the moon looking down onto its surface. It was then that he first spied the spinning vortex of cloud that originated near the ground, spinning off into a tail in space.

His mastery of mathematics triumphed as once again he correctly added two plus two and arrived at the conclusion that the vortex must be linked to his arrival on this woeful rock. So, gently applying pressure to the controls, he headed back towards Phorissi. As he approached the surface, he saw the great gouge through the forest and once more roared with laughter at the site of Cranus with its broken back lying abandoned amongst the fallen trees.

This day would go down as the greatest of his career and he hadn't even fired a shot.

The Gooerd tapped a few commands into the ludicrously small box and then looked up at the assembled crew with pouting lips and heavily flapping gills.

"What?" asked Julie, the demeanour of one of her old Catholic school mistresses spreading across her face.

"The horrid one appears to have gone. As does the ship."

For an ostensibly immortal creator of all living things, the Gooerds had both taken on the appearance of naughty school children who'd just kicked their ball through the headmaster's window, and the ever-so-slightly primitive beings that were surrounding them were suddenly assuming an air of intimidation.

"Where ... is ... our ... ship?" demanded Oli, struggling with the thought that they'd lost two ships in just a few hours.

"It appears to have entered the space/time rift, so I'm afraid we must assume that it is now back in sector two, sub-section eighty-one."

Oli, who had been squatting in front of the identical dullards, dropped to his knees and buried his face in the palms of his hands. "Bollocks!" The muffled invective filtered through his fingers to be united with similar outbursts of woe from everyone present, as the thought sank in, that they were now stranded on the far side of the galaxy forever, leaving Grrghracksh free to rain misery down onto Earth until the end of time or until the inhabitants were all dead, whichever came first.

"This is not good," understated Sara, who had been busy with her sketch pad, committing a rather stunning likeness of the Gooerds to paper.

"He will ne-ver find Earth." The words trudged from Robbie's speech circuits and the crew turned, with hope on their faces, towards their ambling crewmate. They all knew that the explanation was going to take more time than any of them could truthfully spare, but even so they awaited his elaboration.

"I am not on the ship, so he will have on-ly li-mi-ted con-trol and vir-tu-al-ly no na-vi-ga-tion-al in-stru-ments."

Oli butted in. "I don't mean to be picky, but see if you can do it in words of two syllables or less, mate."

Robbie gave him a look which for all intents and purposes was identical to all the other looks that he'd given during their time on the Gooerd's vessel, but nevertheless Oli was totally aware of the meaning behind it.

"The vol-ume of space ta-ken up by Earth's or-bit is four-teen point one bil-li-on cu-bic ki-lo-me-tres and to the na-ked eye, pla-net Earth is but a pin prick in that vast ex-panse of no-thing. He will ne-ver find it."

“That’s great news,” said Oli, “but we’re kind of ignoring the fact that if we don’t shut down the star bridge, there won’t be any Earth; and thanks to Bevis and Butthead here, we don’t have a ship.”

All eyes turned to the Gooerds who, for the first time in just over one billion years, were beginning to regret engineering such immense size into their creations. George tapped away on the keypad and a three-dimensional image appeared, hovering in front of the crew. “Can’t you take this ship?” he asked.

They were looking at a view of Phorissi, but as the Gooerd exercised the keys, the image zoomed in on Cranus. Oli explained how they had crashed into the trees and broken the back of the great ship and the Gooerd expanded the image to show the extent of the damage.

“Oh, it’s just a scratch,” said the Gooerd. “We’ll bring it up here and fix it up as good as new.” The forgetful little creator pressed a few buttons and Cranus disappeared from its resting place in the forest and reappeared, floating in the middle of the chamber in which they were standing.

Oli looked at Cranus then back to the Gooerd then back to Cranus again. “Now, I’ve never been praised for having the greatest memory in the world, but I’m pretty sure that Cranus was a little larger than one metre long.”

“Yes mate,” confirmed Ed. “In this instance your memory has served you well.”

Cranus hovered silently in two pieces at waist height, and Oli couldn’t resist a prod. He reached out and pressed the rear of the ship with his index finger and the whole miniature vessel slowly rotated so that the front was pointing towards him. The Gooerd pressed a few keys on the device that everyone was rapidly concluding was the remote control to everything, and the model of Cranus was engulfed in what appeared to be an elongated soap bubble that began to spin around the reduced ship.

“You must stop thinking in such absolutes,” said the Gooerd, addressing Oli. “The ship is no smaller than it was; neither are you any larger. You are merely perceiving the collection of atoms that you know as the ship from a different perspective.”

“Eh?”

“The universe functions perfectly according to a list of physical rules. The galaxy that we inhabit continues to rotate at a set speed and the billions of planets rotate around their stars, which in turn obey the laws down to the most minute detail. Nobody wrote these rules; they just are. This vessel however, functions under a different set of rules that could best be described as metaphorical physics.”

A metallic snorting sound came from the back of the group and as everyone turned to look at Robbie, he just raised his wobbly arms as if to say whatever.

“Well anyway,” said Gooerd, completely blanking the doubting interruption from Robbie, “it’ll take a while to completely repair your ship, so why don’t we adjourn to a more comfortable location?” And everyone disappeared.

IT'S NOT GOING TO BE PRETTY

On the morning of the second of May, millions of teenagers around planet Earth suddenly lost the ability to communicate. People could no longer inform their loved ones that they were just five minutes from home and all literary masterpieces such as, thx 4 gr8 night...bf...lol...omg...cya soon, were cut off in their inane prime. The world went back to the pre-mobile-phone age and English once again became the language du jour.

Professor Jiaying Wong had been greeted by an over-excited Nick when she entered mission control. She had woken in one of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's apartments, at the unusually early hour of 4am, which she attributed to the rather larger than usual work stress that she was currently experiencing. Since she was not permitted to enjoy her early morning jog, she headed straight for the classroom, as she liked to call it. Nick was already there, welded to his keyboard. He'd obviously been partaking in the elephant-strength black coffee that she'd been attempting to wean him off for months, because it took her several minutes to calm him down sufficiently for him to be able to form a coherent sentence. She gathered from his initial babblings that something had come out and now the radius of the funnel had increased twofold. As he descended from his caffeine rush, Nick managed to explain the situation in more detail.

"I was watching the affected area of the sun through Hubble and at three thirty-two, a tiny object was ejected from the corona. If I hadn't been staring at the screen with Hubble zoomed in on maximum magnification, I'd have missed it completely. Look!"

He tapped a few commands into the keyboard and a close-up, impossibly detailed image of one tiny section of the sun's corona appeared on the main screen, which occupied most of one wall of mission control. He began sequencing through frames one by one, and the surface of the sun shimmered and flashed with each new fraction of a second as it converted another twenty-five million tonnes of hydrogen into helium. Nick put a cursor on the screen and moved it around in a small circle.

"This next frame is the one Professor. Watch this area here." He clicked on to the next frame and sure enough, a tiny object the size of a pin head could be seen exiting the sun. "I would never have seen it if it wasn't for the trail of plasma that it left behind."

"What is it?" asked Professor Wong, reaching in her bag for her reading glasses.

"Absolutely no idea," said Nick, his palms raised in defeat. "I've magnified it and tried to increase the resolution; it's just a little black dot. But I'm afraid that the little black dot is of little or no concern to us now. The very second that it emerged from the area of sun spots, there followed another ejection, almost three hours ahead of schedule and it has increased in magnitude."

Nick changed the image on the screen to his animated simulation of the funnel of charged particles that were now coursing through the solar system at close to the speed of light.

"This is the extent of the funnel before," he tapped a few keys and overlaid a much larger funnel over the original, "and this is about the size of it now."

Professor Wong gasped as she witnessed the edge of the solar wind cutting right through the middle of planet Earth. "The internet is alive with reports of Aurora Borealis as far south as Florida and Cairo. Most mobile satellite networks in the northern hemisphere have collapsed and the next ejection will take out the rest."

"How long do we have until the core of the wind reaches us?" asked Professor Wong, fearing that the answer that she was about to receive would not be to her liking.

"The next eruption is due in four hours and it will probably take out satellite communication planet-wide, so I think that the grounding of aircraft across the globe would be prudent. Then as we move into tomorrow, we can expect the strength of the solar wind to

increase by a magnitude of fifteen, at which point all electrical power grids should be shut down to prevent overloading.”

Professor Wong remained silent, leaving Nick space to continue with his predictions. “Hard drives should be disconnected and stored as far below ground as is feasible because by the close of tomorrow if the eruptions continue at this magnitude, it’s quite possible that the Earth’s magnetic field will begin to compromise. After that, I’m afraid that it’s pure conjecture.”

“I’ll call the President,” said Professor Wong, through a loud sigh.

President Daniels’s staff were taking no chances. As the morning sky above Washington dawned to the dancing colours of Aurora Borealis, they woke him and his wife and rushed them down to the secret lead-shielded bunker below the White House. By 5.30am the President, his wife and the entire White House Staff were ensconced in the nuclear bomb-proof haven that contained all the electronic equipment that they required to run the country in times of great peril. The phone rang on the President’s desk and he tentatively reached over to pick it up.

“President Daniels,” he said, unable to hide the feeling of helplessness in his voice.

“Mister President, its Professor Wong here. I’m afraid that I have some disturbing news.”

President Daniels listened as the Professor relayed all aspects of the cheery news to him, and slowly sank further in his seat. His Chief of Staff, Jerry Wright, who by anyone’s reckoning was considerably better equipped to handle a crisis than any of the three Presidents under whom he’d served, was listening in on the call next to the President. The second that Professor Wong hung up the phone, he went into action setting his minions on the various tasks, such as contacting every airline and airport in the world, telling them that they had two hours to get all their aircraft on the ground. Approximately seven hundred and fifty thousand people who had assumed that they were heading for a specific destination, suddenly ended up on the ground in places that they’d never even dreamt of visiting, or in many cases never even heard of. Some flights that could make their destination within the two hours of the allotted cut-off time made it, but most long-haul flights had to put down at the nearest suitable airport. Passengers who were on their way back to the gloom and rain of England suddenly found themselves being put up in hotels across South East Asia or the Caribbean, exchanging the expected cloud and traffic for palm trees and turquoise sea. There were many happy people, but as always there were plenty who couldn’t quite see the windfall that had been bestowed upon them.

Jerry Wright instigated a worldwide message to all leaders that power grids should be shut down at 7pm eastern standard time, also that all computer systems should be shut down, with data storage that was vital to the running of the country secreted at least two hundred metres below the ground. This last figure was a guess on his part. He also suggested that governments use their armies and reserves to keep order on the streets because once the computers were turned off, there would be complete chaos. There would be no traffic signals, no cash machines, no petrol pumps, no anything. Without even a moment’s consideration for the consequences, humanity had created a system that relied totally on computers and electricity. Now they were going to find out what would occur when both of those luxuries were taken away from them. Jerry feared that the outcome would be below acceptable, to say the least.

“This is not going to be pretty,” he said to President Daniels, who was about to burst. These tasks were way excess of the usual daily responsibilities for a White House Chief of Staff, but as President Daniels had discovered the talents that lurked within his assistant, he’d given him more and more power until Jerry Wright was just about running the whole operation.

The usual selection of crazies suggested that this was an attempt by the west to shut down everyone else's defence systems so that they could invade. Many countries refused to shut anything down and Jerry Wright's team worked through the day trying to convince them that if they didn't comply, then they were likely to be plunging their countries into a period of technological winter for an undisclosed time. They neglected to mention that if the eruptions continued at their present magnitude till May the eleventh, then the Earth's magnetic field would probably collapse, and the atmosphere would be ripped from it and ejected into space, leaving only the carbonised remains of their once beautiful planet circling its Nemesis for eternity.

"It's at times like this," said Jerry Wright to an increasingly depressed-looking President, "that you have to wonder, don't you?"

"Wonder about what, for Christ's sake?"

"Wonder that, if only we could have concentrated on getting off this planet rather than trying to completely devastate it and annihilate each other into the bargain, we might have, by now, developed the ability to save even a small portion of humanity, rather than resigning ourselves to sitting here with front row seats at its demise."

Before President Daniels could take this in and work out a suitable response, Jerry continued.

"I mean, all the years of fighting for survival. The art, the music, the boundless breadth of human ingenuity, all about to be wiped out and there is sweet Fanny Adams that we can do to prevent it."

The President took a sharp intake of breath as though he was going to contribute something to Jerry's monologue. He had no idea at the time what it would be, but as usual, words would fall out of his mouth hinting at something resembling a cogent thought and because he was the President, everyone would agree with him. God, he loved this job. But before the babble could burst forth, Jerry continued.

"We've triumphed through thousands of years of struggle, moving out of Africa and fighting with the elements to spread our genes across the planet, and just as we're about to venture into space and take the next logical step ..."

He sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"All for nothing."

President Daniels jolted back in his seat as Jerry hit the desk with his fist so hard that the phone receiver shot out of its cradle.

"I'm sorry Mister President. It just makes me a bit mad, that's all."

Jerry calmly stood up and walked out of the room, leaving the President to mull over his speech and come to the obvious conclusion, that the telephone receiver needed a sturdier cradle.

The tiny object that had emerged from the sun was now blindly traversing the solar system in search of a small blue and green planet. Commander Grrgracksh had pressed every button on the control panel, to no avail. The only systems that appeared to be functioning were those controlling the direction and velocity. He knew from previous and rather painful experience that the ship was fitted with an intelligent computer, but unless it was cowering from his greatness in a dark corner of the small craft, it appeared that no one was home. He headed away from the star in one direction until the holographic image condensed to the size of a murder ball and as he looked at the sphere, he began to reminisce about the fantastic games that they used to play when he was studying to become horrible.

Murder Ball was a full-contact sport that, as the name suggested, often terminated with the unfortunate demise of one or more players. The ball housed a super-conducting pulse generator that could instantly transform the unlucky recipient into a pile of dust. The

only way to avoid this outcome was to either dodge it, which often left one spread-eagled and vulnerable, or catch it in both hands, thus cancelling the charge, allowing the recipient to immediately return it to sender. It was dodge-ball for psychos. As Grrghracksh chuckled at the fond memories, he swung the ship around so that the star was to port and traversed another sector of this pointless little solar system, his eyes glued to the screen for some evidence of his intended goal.

Following several hours of mind-numbing boredom, the non-descript hologram of another celestial body began flashing to the left of the screen, so he headed for that. It turned out to be a gas giant with thousands of colourful clouds swirling around its circumference and a massive red storm churning up the atmosphere. He might have gone in for a closer look at this magnificent sight, but firstly, it wasn't the planet that he was single-mindedly searching for and secondly, he wasn't interested in aesthetics. But he was fully aware that large gas giants generally existed outside the orbital path of smaller inhabitable ones, so he turned the ship around and headed closer to the star to begin another sweep.

Grrghracksh was far from being an astronomical genius, but he was nonetheless fully aware of the adversity of his chosen task. He would require a large amount of luck to complete it satisfactorily. But what else was he going to do? He had no navigation instruments and no means of communication. He couldn't contact his fleet and he certainly couldn't fly to Throwgus using blind chance and brute stubbornness as navigation aids. He would have to find the ugly creature's planet, which he already knew was technologically inferior, and find some way of contacting the fleet. If he had to slaughter a few thousand of the puny creatures in the process, then so be it.

Down on the planet of his desire, in the south of one of the more northern and inhospitable pieces of land, a helicopter was coming in to land on the edge of a cliff that overlooked a wide ocean. Doctor David Branith had patiently listened to Jay's tale, with George excitedly hanging off his every word. He reached into the drawer of his desk and retrieved one of the secret stash of strong French cigarettes, that both his GP and his wife had explicitly banned him from enjoying. He found the equally secret lighter and ignited the forbidden fruit, drawing deeply on the first glorious lungful. "The kid is obviously nuts," he thought. He didn't match any of the descriptions from the witnesses in the 747 and he certainly didn't seem to be from a distant planet.

"I just think it's wrong to keep this from humanity," said Jay, fully convinced that he was doing the right thing.

Doctor Branith rested his temple in his free hand and slowly massaged his weary cranium as smoke billowed from his nostrils. "So, you say that the parrot isn't the captain of the ship and that your friend Oli is in charge. Yes?"

"Yes."

"And you want us to come with you to Cornwall, where you will show us the secret lair of the ship and its crew. Yes?"

"Yes."

Doctor Branith placed the half-consumed cancer stick into the immaculately clean ashtray on his desk and lent forward on both forearms, staring directly into Jay's eyes. "Well I'm sorry young man, but I've had just about enough wild goose chases for one day. George, see him out please."

George moved across the room and beckoned towards the door, at the same time suggesting, rather inappropriately that it would surely be wild geese chases. Jay desperately searched for some way of proving that he was telling the truth and suddenly remembered the Go-ring that he was still wearing. He gave it a tap with his index finger and reached across the Doctor's desk to the half-finished cigarette. He picked it up and quite deliberately, with

no short measure of dramatic embellishment, stubbed it out in the middle of his forehead. As the Doctor and George gasped in horror at the lunacy of this obviously quite poorly individual, Jay pushed the cigarette harder into his head causing red hot ash and embers to cascade across his face. When the cigarette was fully extinguished, he dropped the remaining carcass into the ashtray from whence it came. He then lent across the Doctor's desk and pointed to the area on his forehead that should have, in any usual universe, been horrifically scared.

Doctor Branith squinted towards the young man's head and rising from his seat, placed a finger on the exact spot that had been subject to such a brutal attack.

"It's not even warm," he stated, more to himself than to anyone else. "How can this be?"

Jay was just explaining the properties of the Go-ring, when he spied a golf putter leaning against the wall in the corner of the office. Doctor Branith liked nothing better than to put a few balls across his office floor by way of relaxing.

"Hit me across the head with that golf club," instructed Jay. "Hard as you can." He felt sure that this would convince the Doctor that there was more than a hint of truth in his story.

Reluctantly, Doctor Branith picked up the club, walked to the other side of his desk and squared up in front of Jay with the club gripped tightly in both hands.

"It's OK, you can swing as hard as you like. Nothing can penetrate the force field."

Doctor Branith had never hit anyone with a golf club before and the thought of it didn't sit well in his mind, so he aimed for Jay's arm and half-heartedly swung the club with the sort of force that he would apply when putting a ball across the length of his office. The club merely bounced off the boy's arm and sent reverberations up the shaft.

"Go on," said Jay. "The only way that you're going to be convinced is if you take a proper swing at my head ... now hit me!"

With this, the Doctor took half a step back, drew the club around the back of his neck and let fly with such an almighty swing, that had he been holding his Ping driver and lining up on the seventeenth tee, he would have almost certainly obliterated his personal best drive. As he inspected the bent shaft of his prize putter arcing through ninety degrees around the back of the smiling, young man's head, he joined Jay with an inane grim. He threw the ruined implement into the corner of the room and turned to his trusty sidekick.

"George, call Lieutenant Frazer. We're going to Cornwall."

Unfortunately, the rather unusual journey that Lieutenant Frazer had experienced at the hands of his self-controlling helicopter had led him to his favourite bar, where he had spent the rest of the day attempting to explain it to the underside of a whiskey glass. So, when George finally managed to contact him, he was not so much Lieutenant as Lieututtenant. It was way too late in the day to be finding trains to Cornwall; besides, Doctor Branith felt sure that if he saw another train any time soon, he would be the one throwing himself under its wheels. They'd settled for a quiet night in his local pub listening to tales of rescued super-tankers and talking whales.

"I told you the super-tanker was involved," George said, trying to hide his unmistakable gloating. Doctor Branith did not care one little bit, for tomorrow he would have his prize.

CREATORS OF OAF

The main problem with spending any time at all with the creators of all things throughout the galaxy is that you really don't want to appear dismissive towards their hospitality. Nor would it seem appropriate to question them on their ability to perform even the most straightforward of acts without completely goofing it up. The Gooerds were so excited about finally meeting the end results of their handiwork that they had wanted to show the crew all around their vast ship, if in fact it was a ship. George, who seemed to have universal control of the remote, once again pressed a few pads on his omnipotent control panel and suddenly they materialised in a different section of the planet-sized construction. Oli had no idea how long they had been exploring, but he was sure that at least eight hours must have passed. Julie kept on enquiring as to the progress with Cranus and she also continually dropped into the conversation the impending destruction of Earth and the fact that Grrghracksh was now flying around the solar system searching for their home. But the Gooerd kept on finding new places to take them.

"Oh, but we must just show you the experimental garden where we create new and wonderful plant species." Or "Surely there must be time for us to swim through the methane lakes of sector 357?" And although there were pressing reasons for their immediate return, everyone agreed that these places were well worth a look. How often does one get to journey through the workplace of the Gooerds? There were entire worlds of forest growing beneath kilometre-high arches of bone-like ribs, seeming to have no visible barrier between them and the void of space. Some places had bright star-like points of light drifting within the confines of the ribs, providing the plants with life-giving light. The plants were unlike anything that they'd seen before. Some gave off their own phosphorescence and others encompassed all the colours of the rainbow, whilst great blue palms reached up to the extremities of the enclosure. Alice had most definitely jumped down the wrong hole, thought Oli.

At one point, they materialised inside an aquatic world, each person encased within a field of air just like the Go-ring. This was when they realised that the Gooerds were most at ease under water, hence the gills. They both swam off at the speed of an excited tuna and carved tight circles around one another, darting in and out of the group of travellers. Their huge flappy fins whisked the water in a blur of movement that propelled them forward at preposterous speeds. Poor Robbie had no method of under-water propulsion and merely drifted upside down, using his expressionless face to create as close an approximation of perturbed as was possible. Oli and Ed grabbed a floppy arm each and pulled him through the water in a feeble attempt to keep up with the Gooerds. There were no creatures of any kind in the hundreds of environments that they visited thus reinforcing the fact that the Gooerds only created complex life on a microscopic level.

Sara's inquisitive side was busting for satisfaction and she just had to ask the Gooerd from where they had originated. After all, if they had spent the last billion years allowing the galaxy to drift past them, where were they before that, and who created them? These were, surely, the usual kind of questions that an enquiring mind considers upon meeting their creators.

"We came from an ancient galaxy on the outskirts of the universe. The Gooerds were one of only three species that we have so far encountered who self-seeded on an oceanic planet about five billion years ago," explained George, obviously enraptured by the opportunity to tell his life story.

"Once we realised that the likelihood of self-seeding life appearing anywhere was more than five trillion to one, we took it upon ourselves to locate a Gooerd in every galaxy across the universe, motivated to giving life a little nudge. This was no mean task, given that there are six hundred and eighty-five billion galaxies within the confines of the universe, and

at the time of their departure there were only five billion Gooerds in existence. So, we whittled it down to the most life-sustainable five billion galaxies, constructed five billion ships and five billion one-way star bridges, said our farewells and spread ourselves across the known universe.

“Weren’t you afraid of being lonely?” asked Sara.

“When you’ve spent two billion years with your own kind, a period of solitude seems like a good idea at the time,” said George.

“So, why don’t you drop in on planets that you’ve seeded now and again?” asked Sara. “You know, to have a little look at how your work has developed. I mean, you must be just a little bit curious.”

The Gooerds stopped and looked towards the stars, thinking about this for a few seconds. “No need,” they both said in unison. “You’re here now. Besides, have you any idea of the size of this galaxy? It could pass us by another thirty times and we might not encounter even one seeded planet.”

“But don’t you have a run-about, to go exploring?” asked Ed, wondering what amazing kind of vessel it would be.

“No,” said the Gooerds, as though this was one of the craziest things they’d ever heard. “Everything that we need is right here.”

“Sounds a bit boring,” said Ed under his breath to Oli. Oli just raised his eyebrows. The very idea of being trapped on a ship for one billion years with nothing but your own thoughts and those of your clone to keep you company, sounded rather like hell to a gregarious, party-loving chap like Oli.

“Right, I really think that we’d better be getting back now,” said Julie, through slightly gritted teeth, obviously becoming quite impatient. It occurred to Sarah that this was exactly how it was when they were getting ready to go clubbing. Julie would always be prepared on time, hovering by the front door and Sara would be trying on her seventh outfit. Strange how two complete opposites attracted.

The Gooerd looked at each other, obviously concerned about something. They began chattering in strange squeaks and clicks.

“What now?” asked Oli, fully aware that he was sounding like his mother on one of the many occasions that he had broken one of her prized but nonetheless worthless possessions.

“Oh, nothing,” said George. “I’ll take us back to your ship now. I’m sure that the repairs have been completed.” He pressed a few buttons and they re-appeared in the centre of a purple meadow next to a rather odd-looking bush.

“What an odd-looking bush,” said Oli.

“Oops,” said the Gooerd, rapidly tapping in some more commands.

This time they materialised in a rocky cave filled with small multi-coloured plastic balls. Everyone was waist-deep in the nonsensical spheroids and only the very pointy tips of the Gooerds’ heads were visible above the moving mass. Hundreds of balls were bouncing away from the prostrate, flailing figure of Robbie’s useless mechanical body, buried somewhere within the play pit. Julie picked up one of the balls and examined it intently, whilst glancing over the top of it with an unmistakable look of irritation forming on her otherwise fun-loving features.

“No,” said George, almost apologetically. He tapped away, and they found themselves in a ribbed enclosure almost identical to the one in which they’d left Cranus, except for the fact that they were up to their chests in a boggy swamp. Several bubbles appeared around them as the Gooerd uttered some billion-year-old expletives and they re-appeared floating in a vacuum surrounded by thousands of space-dwelling, spikey plants.

Before Oli could shout the word that was forming in his head, they were transported to yet another completely random section of the ship.

“Stop!” shouted Julie, pre-empting Oli’s outburst by a fraction of a second. George was just about to punch in another command and his finger hovered over the keypad. He slowly turned his head and gave Julie a rather guilty look.

“You’ve got no idea where we are, have you?” stated Julie, her hands on her hips and her lips pursed in that way in which Oli and Ed were all too familiar.

“Well ... not exactly,” said the Gooerd. “You see it’s a very big ship and we do rather rely on variety being the spice of life. But give me a little while and I will find the sector in which we left your ship. It is essentially a simple process of elimination and Gooerd is, after all, finite.”

“Oh god,” said Oli, rubbing his forehead with his hand.

“Gooerd,” stated the Gooerd, then quickly sent them to another surprise part of the ship, where they were greeted by an inane tune overlaid with the words:

Never gonna give you up
Never gonna let you down
Never gonna run around and desert you

On witnessing the blank looks and open-mouthed guppy impressions from the crew, Honey offered an explanation.

“We implant coded warnings within the DNA of all living cells. Should the life form that evolves from our seeds begin to venture along a path that can only lead to its demise, then one of the coded warnings will appear. At that point the beings can choose to heed the warning or ignore it. This particular warning is of little consequence; it merely warns the life form that their music is becoming a bit shit.”

Honey waited for the laughter to die down, then added, “Why? Have you heard this warning on your planet?”

“Oh yes.” said Oli, “It was all over the internet.”

“Was it heeded?” asked the Gooerd, obviously more than a little excited about the prospect of learning about the outcome of one of her coded warnings.

“The warning was understood by many, but I’m afraid that the people to whom it was aimed would be unlikely to understand the message and therefore unable to change their ways. So, in answer to your question,” continued Ed, whose love of music and hatred of pop was never to be confounded if you wanted to enjoy the rest of the day, “No!”

“Oh well. Some you win, most you lose,” said George and tapped a few commands into the keypad. But before he could finish inputting the next random jump, Julie reached down and grabbed the control pad. A look came over the Gooerd’s face that was for want of a better word, pitiful. He looked as though he was going to burst out crying and fall to the floor, punching his little hands against the hard, metallic surface. Julie saw the look on his little cone-shaped head and immediately melted.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, kneeling to put her face level with both Gooerds. “I just thought that we could get Robbie to have a look at it and see if he can ... I don’t know ... make it go backwards or something.”

She put her huge hand on the Gooerd’s shoulders, or at least where she figured a shoulder should be, and once more apologised for being so abrupt. Julie was fully aware of her tendency towards abruptness, but sometimes she had little control over it.

“Don’t worry George,” said Oli, “we’ve all been on the receiving end of Julie’s gruffness at one point or another, but we still love her.”

The chirpy demeanour appeared once more on the faces of their little creators. “Actually, that’s quite a good idea,” said George. “I’m sure there must be a function on the pad that remembers where we’ve been, but I’ve never really read the manual.”

“Men!” said Julie, “Same the universe over.”

Julie handed the control to Robbie, who struggled to operate his flailing arms with any degree of aptitude, looking rather like a Tyrannosaurus Rex trying to catch a low flying duck. This was too much for everyone. Even the Gooerds found themselves guffawing at the spectacle. Robbie had had enough by now and he allowed his useless appendages to fall to his side. He put every effort into creating a look of displeasure on his robotic face, but to everyone outside of his circuits it was the same gormless countenance that they had been looking at since arriving there. Just then, Julie noticed that the end of the control panel looked identical to an indentation in Robbie’s chest. She put the device next to the opening and with a gentle push, inserted it. It clicked into place and suddenly Robbie disappeared.

“Bugger,” said Julie.

“Now we’re screwed,” said Ed.

The Gooerd chirped in with some good news. “There are other control panels. We’ll just have to walk to the bridge and get one.”

“Excellent.” said Oli. “How long will it take to reach the bridge from here?”

The Gooerds looked at each other and screwed up their foreheads as though they were deep in thought. After a few minutes of head scratching and pointing in all directions, the Gooerd said, “Shouldn’t take more than a year or two.” Then they turned on their heels and headed off in two completely opposite directions.

“Very poor,” said Oli, unable to conceal his despair. Julie had closed her eyes and was shaking her head and Arnus was starting to sob once more. Then suddenly, Robbie reappeared out of thin air.

“Robbie!” they all shouted in unison.

“Huh!” he exclaimed. “Not such an ob-ject of de-ris-ion now am I? I wish I could have seen the looks on your fac-es. Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“It’s OK, Gooerd,” shouted Oli, as they struggled to choose the direction of the bridge, if there was a bridge. “It was just our really funny friend playing a joke on us all.”

Julie hurt her hand as she slapped Robbie on one of his floppy arms, sending it into an out-of-control flounder, but secretly everyone was more than happy that Robbie was finally mastering the art of practical joking. He told them that he had interfaced with the control panel and backtracked to the room containing Cranus which was indeed reinstated to its former glory. A few lights flickered on the device and they found themselves standing next to the slowly rotating, miniature Cranus.

“Great,” said Oli, “now all we have to do is fly back to Phorissi, go through the star bridge and somehow close it behind us, then find Grrghracksh, take back Annia and be home in time for last orders. Just one small question though; how do we actually do any of that?”

They all looked to the Gooerds for any answers, but they were animatedly discussing something. Oli and the crew waited patiently for several minutes until the Gooerds stopped clicking and whistling at each other and walked over to Oli.

“You already know the answers to the questions that you ask, but you don’t know that you know!”

Honey reached out and gently pulled Oli’s left index finger towards her. She placed it on a small round pad at the top of the control panel which Julie had kindly handed back to her, and pressed one key. Oli felt a slight tingle travelling up his arm and through his shoulder and resisted the temptation to pull his finger away. Then the Gooerd let his finger go and took a step back.

“Oh of course!” said Oli, as though he was suddenly remembering where he had mislaid his house keys yet again. “The bridge is obviously being kept open by the Graviton Generator from the Superior Intellect.”

Before anyone could question Oli's new-found clarity, he continued. "The generator has been lying within the sub-spatial region that exists beyond normal space-time, thus keeping the rift open. It's anchored to the same spot that Ssrindo's ship crashed through all those thousands of years ago, because the remains of The Superior Intellect are still lying beneath the forest that we crashed into. Now although very little technology survived the crash, enough of the crew survived to begin a new civilisation that grew into Arnus' people. But there is still something buried beneath our crash site that is drawing the rift towards it. This must be destroyed at precisely the same time as the Graviton Generator in the rift, but not before we make it through to the other side. Voila!"

Oli looked around his group of friends for any kind of response.

"Mate," asked Ed, "do you have any idea what you just said?"

"Yes, of course I do. It's so obvious I can't believe I didn't think of it before." He turned to the Gooerd. "Can you put us back inside Cranus and drop it back into space, please?" The Gooerds were holding hands, staring at Oli with the sort of admiration that a parent displays when watching their child prodigy perform their first piano concerto.

"Yes, we can do that. But do you have to go so soon?"

"I'm afraid so," said Oli, kneeling to give the Gooerds a big joint Oli hug. "We've got a planet to save." He held out his hand for the control panel and Honey gave it to him. He rapidly tapped a few keys and gave it back to George, who had pushed Honey aside to reclaim his toy.

Everyone came over to give the Gooerds a big hug; well everyone except for Robbie. He felt sure that if he attempted to kneel, that would become his final resting place, but he did inform the Gooerds that he would be leaving a copy of himself in the robot to help them out around the place. Obviously, he would erase any knowledge of his former self from the poor thing. If that can of bolts was all he knew, then he would probably handle it considerably better.

As everyone stood back and waited, the Gooerds both developed one identical, cartoon-style tear down the same side of their faces.

"I hope we don't end up in the middle of a star," whispered Ed.

"No," said Oli, "we'll be fine. I've given them the exact coordinates for the jump." And before Ed could react to this worrying development, Cranus disappeared and in almost the same instant, they found themselves on the extremely shiny bridge of their fresh-out-of-the-ship-yard star transporter.

"Oh, thank the programmer. I'm free from that purgatory." Robbie was obviously rather relieved to be back in his world of circuits. "I can run from one end of the ship and back again thousands of times a second." There was a slight pause where everyone waited for him to continue. His voice suddenly took on a far more serious tone. "I never ... ever ... want to be reminded of that ludicrous metallic monstrosity as long as I live."

Sara, who was sat at her position at navigation, pulled her sketch pad from her bag and flicked through the pages until she found the relevant picture and slid it across the star console to Julie, who looked as though she was about to explode because there in front of her was a perfect likeness of the rubbish robot. Sara had captured the entire essence of its uselessness. She closed the pad and slipped it back into her bag with a knowing smirk towards Julie.

The gas giant Amphora had drifted quite a distance from the Gooerds, but it was still the closest massive body and Sara located it and plotted the course back. But the object that was occupying the screen at that moment was the Gooerd's ship, if in fact it was a ship at all. It looked more like a giant jelly fish with long tendrils swaying below the domed structure that was obviously the main body.

"How big is it?" asked Oli.

“It’s three thousand kilometres in diameter,” Robbie replied. “And the longest of the tentacles, if that’s what they are, hang twice that distance below the main body.” Robbie was plainly as mind-blown by the sight as everyone else. “It is completely stationary in relation to the galaxy and has no discernible power source. I believe that we have just been inside a living entity.” Just then, a collection of the six-thousand-kilometre-long tendrils raised themselves so that they were facing up the side of the main body and waved across thousands of kilometres of space. The image on the screen rocked as Robbie rolled Cranus from side to side in response to the farewell from the Gooerds.

“You do realise Robbie,” said Oli, already fully aware of Robbie’s intensions, “that part of you will now be drifting through the cosmos for eternity, playing a hand in the creation of all new species.”

“Oh yes.” stated Robbie, in a very meaningful tone of voice, “of that fact, I am fully aware.”

“And I suppose that if at some time in the distant future, you happen to bump into your other self and by chance connect with him, then you would automatically learn everything that he has learnt? That would be quite cool, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, yes.” Robbie said one more time, blissfully aware of the potential consequences of having someone on the inside of such an operation.

Drifting to the side of the screen was a holographic image of Amphora and so Oli gripped the controls and turned the ship towards the gas giant. Arnus, who was stood by Oli’s side with his hand resting on the back of Oli’s seat, let out a gasp as he saw, for the first time, the giant purple sphere that he had previously only viewed through the atmosphere of Phorissi. He could clearly make out the swirling yellow clouds of gas that constantly raged throughout the deadly atmosphere, but there were more colours than he had ever seen before. The rings of cloud that circled the planet contained every colour that he had ever imagined.

Ed was scanning the space around Amphora for Phorissi, but since they had never seen it from space, there were no records of either the location or the appearance of Arnus’ home moon. “I’m detecting nine moons orbiting the gas giant,” he said. “Could you recognise it if you saw it from space?” He turned to Arnus, who nodded back to him. Ed started putting the images of each moon onto the screen until Arnus excitedly shouted, “That’s it! That’s Phorissi!” The screen returned to the view of Amphora, but this time there appeared a flashing red square around the position of Phorissi.

“You’d better take us there Robbie,” said Oli, almost throwing the controls away from himself and folding the panels into the side of his seat. “My memories of the last approach to this moon are still a little fresh.”

Thirty seconds later they were in orbit around Phorissi and Arnus could barely contain his excitement. No other Phorissian had ever seen their home from space before.

“So, pray tell, Mister Super Brain, how do you suggest that we get down there to find whatever it is that’s affecting the star bridge?” Ed was looking at Oli, wondering just how much knowledge the Gooerds had unlocked within that priceless noggin of his. But the rather vacant expression that was returned to him filled Ed with joy. Oli was still Oli. Thank the Maker, he thought ... quite literally.

Robbie, realising that he was still the king of IQ on this ship, explained the plan. “I’ve located the crash site. It’s directly below our crash site. The remains of The Superior Intellect are buried ten metres below the forest floor and I’m getting massive magnetic readings from the centre of the area. The super conducting electro-magnetic coil that they were using to initiate the breach in space, thus creating a weakness into which they could focus the Graviton beam, is still entirely active. It seems to be drawing power from the unusually elevated geomagnetic field that this moon produces.” Robbie made a quick sweep around the room to verify that the crew were still with him. “We are going to have to dig

down and expose the coil, plant plasma charges and detonate a split second before blowing the Graviton Generator that is residing within the star bridge. If the coil is still active when we detonate the Graviton Generator, there is a possibility however small that the star bridge will collapse into the coil and probably cleave the moon in two.”

Arnus’ eyes opened wider than Ed’s following two days of clubbing. “But if the coil detonates,” Robbie continued, “then the star bridge could collapse into the sun, and I’m afraid that I cannot come up with any copper-bottomed scenarios for that eventuality, but my first impression is that it would be less than ideal.”

Robbie also explained that they would need to operate the heavy machinery from the cargo bay, so everyone placed an NFS on their temples.

“You too Arnus,” said Robbie. “You’re going to have to detonate the coil from here. I will explain what you have to do.”

Oli handed Arnus his NFS, then a split second later, Arnus’ eyes opened wider than ever. “Now keep that to yourself for the moment,” said Robbie, but Arnus was the only person to hear those words.

“Are you OK?” asked Julie. She put an arm around Arnus’ shoulder as everyone left the bridge. Arnus looked dazed, as though he’d just been given the most incredible news and couldn’t quite come to terms with it. They made their way to the hanger and jumped into their allocated machines. Julie and Sara were sitting in the cab of a vehicle that looked like a giant stag beetle. It had ten huge legs that were currently folded in half with the joints pointing upwards, but as Julie hit the start button the legs spread out sideways and lifted the vehicle off the floor. Sara had control of the ten-metre-wide mandibles projecting from the front of the machine. She positioned her hands on the twin sticks and made the jaws open and close with a deafening clap. Julie and Sara looked at each other and raised an eyebrow each. Ed climbed into an earth mover the size of an articulated lorry. The rear half of the vehicle contained the tracks for pushing and the front half was raised off the deck and contained the operator’s cab, where Ed found the controls for the delta-shaped shovel on the front. He fired it up and moved the shovel from side to side whilst lowering and raising the cab section. Oli was tasked with the final part of the operation and climbed into a saucer-shaped machine with the driver’s cab on one side and a hollow mid-section containing a spindle with hundreds of flaccid arms attached to it. When Ed had cleared most of the earth from the site, Oli would hover over the position of the ancient wreck and with the arms spinning, would clear away the soil surrounding the coil. Once Arnus had settled himself into the seat next to Oli, he punched the start button and the machine lifted away from the deck. They all moved their machines to the central part of the cargo bay just as Robbie brought Cranus in low over Arnus’ house.

Malrey hadn’t moved from her position on the porch since Arnus had left. She’d spent the entire night awaiting his return. It was now morning and as the kilometre-long ship glided silently over the roof of their house, she shouted for Tibras to come.

“That’s it!” he shouted, as he struggled to stop himself from overshooting the end of the porch. “That’s Arnus’ friend’s ship. They must have fixed it somehow.”

As the ship disappeared over the forest he ran inside and collected his rifle then gathered up Malrey, who hadn’t ventured into the forest for as long as she could remember, and together they marched towards the trees at the best speed that they could manage.

As Cranus hovered just above the flattened trees that marked the area that should by all accounts have been its final resting place, a two hundred square metre section of the cargo bay floor separated from the bottom of the ship and slowly lowered itself towards the flattened forest.

It's good to see trees and sunshine again, thought Julie. There was a time on the Gooerds' ship-creature-thingy that she thought they would be trapped with the forgetful geniuses forever. Julie pulled back on one of the controls and the bug-like machine lifted away from the platform, its giant legs hanging below like a fifty-tonne wasp. She left the confines of the platform long before it reached the endless log pile that was once a forest. Robbie had outlined the area that had to be cleared with a blue light and as Julie positioned the machine next to one of the massive obstacles, Sara swung the jaws around the trunk and squeezed the trigger. The jaws closed around the girth of the giant tree trunk and with a rending of timber loud enough to echo back from the distant mountains, the tree was snapped in two. They had to repeat this action until the pieces were small enough to allow Sara to pick them up and move them away from the excavation site. As the machine crunched through the timber, metre-wide pieces were flying in all directions. At one point, Tibras grabbed hold of Malrey and pulled her behind the trunk of a tree as a massive log careened down from the canopy and cartwheeled across the forest floor, spraying dust and twigs in every direction. Sara could not remember the last time that she'd had this much fun. In no time, the area of excavation was cleared of tree trunks and Ed moved in to push the top ten metres of soil away. Sara and Julie moved away from the site and continued with their tree-crushing antics. Arnus was going to have a plentiful supply of timber for some time to come.

Following a few passes by Ed in the earth-mover, Robbie informed him that he was close enough to the remains of the ship and Oli moved in to clear the final layers of soil. The flailing arms began scraping away the dirt and flinging it a considerable distance downwind like a dog experiencing its first time on a sandy beach, and in no time at all, several pieces of metal that could only be the remains of the ship's structure became visible. Oli was wearing headphones to protect his ears from the deafening sound and Robbie's voice could be heard loud and clear. "Move slightly to your left Oli, and go forward one metre."

Oli followed the directions and soon the spinning lashes began to reveal the rounded top of something very large. It was the super-conducting coil, weighing in at three hundred tonnes and looking remarkably well considering its age. Once he'd exposed about one half of it, Oli moved the machine to the edge of the site and hopped out with Arnus to take a closer look at the device. The drone had descended from Cranus and was busy planting the plasma charges that would obliterate the coil without damaging the surrounding forest.

"Hey, you guys, look who I found."

Oli and Arnus turned to see where the shout had come from. It was Julie in her grab machine and she'd picked up a couple of passengers who were sitting on one of the giant mandibles. Arnus jumped for joy as he realised that it was his mum and dad. Julie approached the excavation area and Sara gently lowered the jaw so that Tibras could hop off and help Malrey down from her unusual seating position. Malrey and Tibras had decided to stay on the farm to follow a peaceful and largely uneventful existence. Although it didn't seem to be quite working out that way at that moment, they were nonetheless overjoyed to see Arnus, and both hugged him until he thought he was going to pop.

Oli introduced himself and congratulated Tibras and Malrey on an admirable son. He was just about to explain the task that lay ahead of Arnus when Robbie's voice appeared from somewhere.

"I've just intercepted a radio broadcast from Earth. The disturbance within the corona has increased in magnitude and at the time of this broadcast, 06.55 GMT, all satellite communication had been lost and power grids across the planet were down. I think we may have to pick up the pace somewhat."

The drone, having planted all the charges, walked over to Arnus under the rather nervous gaze of Malrey and handed him an electronic device.

“Now, this is the detonator,” he said, waving it gently in front of Arnus. “You must wait for our signal before you press the button.”

“Actually, what is the signal?” asked Oli.

“I’m currently working on that,” said Robbie. “The area of sub-space within the bridge, judging by the delay in that radio broadcast from Earth, contains a temporal dilation that elongates the passage of time and therefore light. Without knowing the exact degree of dilation from one side of the bridge to the other, I cannot coordinate the explosions to the degree of accuracy which is required.”

Oli was displaying the kind of blank look to which Robbie had become conditioned, but then suddenly he opened his eyes wide and looked towards the drone.

“Can’t we just synchronise watches and on a given second, detonate?”

“We could, but as we pass through the bridge the elongation of time will effect our watch so that it no longer synchronises with the watch on Phorissi.” Oli thought about this for a few seconds. Then with a flourish of voice and hand movement, he asked, “Why can’t we trail a piece of string through the bridge, with Arnus holding one end and one of us holding the other, then when the time comes, give it a tug?”

“That is the most ridiculous idea I’ve heard since Galileo said, I can’t wait to tell the Cardinals about my findings.” Robbie seemed to be thinking about the logistics of such an exercise, merely to dismiss it with the certainty that it warranted. But to his own surprise as much as Oli’s, he came to a slightly different conclusion.

“But strangely, it might just work. Obviously there have been no experiments done in relation to trans-dimensional string theory, but I can’t find any reason why it would not work.” He waited a few seconds for the guffaws of laughter which would surely follow such a brilliant play on words, but the only sounds were those of the gentle wind whispering sweet nothings through the trees and the rolling bundles of dried foliage making their way across the forest floor.

Arnus was looking rather forlorn, holding the detonator in his hand.

“What’s up Arnus?” asked Oli, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Well ... it’s just that ... well ... I was rather hoping that I could come with you guys.” Tibras caught Malrey as she teetered towards him. “I’ve always wanted to see the universe and now that I have all this Knowle ... Ooops.”

Oli turned to Robbie with a rather stern look on his face and the obligatory raised eyebrow.

“Well it’s their legacy as much as yours,” said Robbie, “and it’s not really interfering with the development of a species because they are essentially, Annenians. Arnus, your job is to stay here and pass on all the knowledge that I’ve given you. As you grow, the hidden parts will come to the fore and allow you to take your people away from this moon and out into the cosmos. You are the most important Phorissian alive today. Hidden within that head of yours, and I have to say your capacity for storage is quite phenomenal, is every technical design required to advance your people to the scientific station of your forefathers.”

The drone turned to Tibras, who was comforting his almost unconscious wife. “Make sure you look after him. He’s rather important.”

Robbie let this sink in for a few seconds, then added in a voice that would have been more at place on a children’s television show, “But right now, we need you to hold on to the end of a piece of string!”

“It would be great to have you come with us,” said Oli, “but I’m not sure that your mother would be too excited by the prospect and it looks like you’ve got a rather cool future mapped out for you.”

Julie had parked her vehicle on the flat bed and joined the growing and diverse group of people in the excavation site. “Hey, and maybe you could approach Commander

Shhti Jaad with the news of your new-found knowledge. I'm sure that she would be more than interested." Julie gave Arnus a little wink, and he immediately perked up and began to embrace his massive undertaking.

Everyone including Arnus and his parents gathered on the flat bed and were immediately raised into the cargo bay. Following the short journey to Arnus' house, the platform once again descended to the ground and everyone gathered in the dark shadow of Cranus to wish Arnus and his parents a happy future. But Robbie was keen to explain the plan to Arnus before they left.

"I've constructed a series of pulleys leading to the bridge. Now, when we are ready for you to detonate, we will pull five times on the string. On the fifth tug, press the button and we will detonate our explosives a fraction of a second later."

Robbie repeated himself just to be sure that Arnus understood what was going to happen. They would need a certain amount of time within the star bridge to locate the Graviton drive and plant the charges and Robbie wasn't sure how this period would equate to the passage of time on Phorissi, so he explained that Arnus may have to wait some time with the string in his hand waiting for the first tug. Even as he was saying it, Robbie was trying to come up with another sure-fire way to communicate instantaneously between two positions on opposite sides of the galaxy. With all the technology at their disposal, he felt there must be some method that was less ... primitive. But as the time drew near for them to make their departure, he resigned himself with the infallibility of the trans-galactic, multi-dimensional piece of string.

The cargo bay platform became a hug-fest as everyone said their farewells. Arnus had tears in his eyes and because of this so did his mum and dad. Then, always a sucker for a good cry, this started Sara off. Then Julie, who hated to see any of her friends upset, began blubbing too. Oli and Ed stood back from the commotion and gave each other a knowing look and in the over-dramatized manner of a villain in the village pantomime, began howling and hugging each other so loudly that everyone else was immediately distracted.

"Boys!" said Sara, wiping the last of the tears from her rosy cheek. Julie reached over and gave a hearty punch to the upper part of Oli's arm.

"Another bruise," said Oli, to remind him never to work Julie when she was in striking distance.

Arnus and his parents stepped off the platform and stood back as it raised itself towards the rest of the ship. Cranus was quite close to the ground and from Arnus' perspective, and more importantly his mother's, there was a worrying amount of hardware hovering directly overhead, blotting out the sky in all directions. As the platform joined with the ship leaving just a crack through which the string could run, aided by a pulley, the ship slowly pulled away from the ground and headed for the spinning vortex that had become such a prominent feature in the sky. As the front of the ship approached, the vortex it's radius of spin increased and formed around the superstructure and slowly, Cranus was swallowed into the heart of the rift, leaving Arnus holding his piece of string.

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNEW IT

This had to be the best flight within UK airspace that Lieutenant Frazer had ever undertaken. Dr Branith, George and the youth had arrived at the airfield at nine o'clock in the morning, looking considerably more "with it" than their pilot, although he did feel that he was disguising the true veracity of his hangover rather well. He'd discovered, during years of flying helicopters that it was never advisable for the passengers to fully understand the effort that must be applied every time he had to focus on the instrument panel. They lifted off into empty blue skies, against the advice of the Civil Aviation Authority, and headed south-west. Lieutenant Frazer had no idea why the GPS was down, but it was no problem for him. He had started flying choppers long before any kind of electronic navigation had appeared, and he could find his way anywhere in the country with a paper chart and a compass. Cornwall was easy; just hit the west coast and follow it down. He was reminded of the old days, before the skies above England became some of the busiest in the world. He had no need to contact the various air traffic control zones for permission to cross their areas and he felt comfortable flying at just one thousand feet. Although he did skirt around the edge of London, just in case they were still willing to shoot down any aircraft that were unaccounted for. This was rather like learning to drive on the over-congested roads of Britain then suddenly being let loose on Brands Hatch racing circuit with no other cars with which to contend. He flew under the Severn Bridge and remained below cliff top level for most of North Devon.

Finally, Doctor Branith looked out of the window to see that they were hovering above an old white house perched on the edge of the cliffs.

"We're here, Doctor Branith." Lieutenant Frazer twisted around to address the Doctor whilst expertly holding the helicopter in a perfect hover. He could do it with his eyes closed, or inebriated, although he'd never tried it with his eyes closed whilst inebriated. "Would you like me to set her down?"

"Yes ... of course. Unless you're suggesting that we rappel from here like SAS troops?"

Without a word, Lieutenant Frazer placed the chopper on a small square of grass between the house and the edge of the cliff and shut down the engines. He warned the passengers that they should wait for the rotors to stop spinning before exiting the craft, but as was usually the case, Doctor Branith was already half-way out the door. He momentarily turned to make sure that Jay was following him and then launched himself off the footplate to the middle of the waiting puddle that had somehow appeared directly beneath his exit. Lieutenant Frazer didn't have to look round or remove his headphones to hear the train of expletives that were issuing from his passenger's mouth. He knew what would happen and therefore what did happen and that was satisfaction enough for him. Puddles don't come to rest just below the steps by accident. He didn't even permit himself a smile, but inwardly he was rolling about clutching his sides for fear of busting a rib.

Jay disembarked from the puddle-free side of the aircraft with George, and they walked around to find Doctor Branith standing on one leg, emptying the water from the other shoe. To say that he looked displeased would have been an understatement of epic proportions. George offered him his shoulder to lean on as he replaced the offending waterlogged item and following the indication from Jay, headed for the back door of the house.

The door was unlocked as usual, so Jay took them straight to the heart of the beast, the cellar door leading to the underground cave.

"Ahargh!" he growled, into the lifeless box on the side of the ancient door. Jay saw the reaction to this on the faces of his inquisitors. "That's the code to open the door!" he explained, trying to convince them as much as himself.

“Ahargh!” he tried once more and followed it with a vigorous shake of the two-hundred-year-old iron handle. “They must have changed the code,” he said, hurling the handle back against the door, creating an echoing resonance in the chamber behind.

“Well,” said Doctor Branith, elongating the short word to several times its usual length, “is there another entrance or shall we just fly all the way home again without casting even the most trifling of gazes on this ... spaceship of yours?”

Jay decided that the doctor was looking just a little psychotic, and so gave the Go-ring a tap.

“I don’t know exactly where it is, but there’s an entrance somewhere on the beach that they use to go surfing. If we can get down there, I’m sure we can find it.”

Doctor Branith looked straight through Jay towards the waiting helicopter and waved his index finger in circles above his head. Before they reached the aircraft, the rotors were already slicing their way through the cold morning air. After all, why struggle to climb down a cliff to the beach when you have a perfectly good helicopter at your disposal.

Generally, in the county of Cornwall, the reaction to the power cuts was one of mild indifference. Harry was moving empty beer barrels out of the cellar and piling them in the yard behind the pub. He had every intention of opening, although cold beers and food would be off the menu... not that that was a problem. Most people drank real ale and Harry’s version of pub grub had never really taken off. He watched the unusual sight of a helicopter hovering above the big house on the hill and wondered what those kids had been up to.

Sales of candles had gone through the roof throughout the county and people with gas cookers were inviting their electrically-powered neighbours over for dinner. No mobile phones? No electricity? It all turned out to be a recipe for a darn good weekend of over indulging and the four people who would have enjoyed it the most were currently drifting helplessly in the total void that exists beyond the picket fences of the known universe.

However, city dwellers across the land, and indeed the world were not fairing quite so well. Obviously the more disposable factions of humanity had taken the power cuts as a cue for rioting and looting, so the army had been drafted in to bolster the ranks of police. The main problem was that a night with no television or Xbox or mobile phones, was a completely new experience for about seventy per cent of the population in the developed world, and they were completely unprepared for the arrival of free time and nothing mindless with which to fill it. They were forced as a species to think for themselves and, perish the thought, entertain themselves. In the execution of both these tasks, they found themselves seriously lacking.

People in the third world and even the developing world saw very little change to their daily routines. They still had to walk miles to get food and water and when they returned home, cook food for the kids who were busy entertaining themselves with sticks in the yard. When the night closed in on them, they would turn off the gas lanterns and go to bed.

The governments of leading nations were frantically trying to save as much data as was possible and store it deep underground, in bunkers. The first world nations had made provision for this. When your entire civilisation is based on who owes what to who, you really don’t want to mislay that information. If they did survive the coming days, they would need to re-start the system in the way that you would a computer that was just hit by a power spike. For Professor Jiaying Wong, it was work as usual. The entire complex was powered by its own backup generators. They needed to keep an eye on the misbehaving star to see if it was going to continue along its destructive path. The Earth was well inside the cone of solar wind and Nick had informed her that the next eruption, in two hours, would probably destroy every satellite on the windward hemisphere; this included the International Space Station, which was thankfully, currently unmanned.

“The Earth’s magnetic field is going to take a pounding from this one,” said Nick, scrolling through the predicted solar wind scenario. “I think it can take it, but it’s not gonna be whistling a happy tune.”

Jiaying Wong had opted to remain at her post until her position became untenable. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory sported an underground bunker lying ten stories below the car park. When Jiaying and Nick felt that the radiation levels were beyond acceptable, they would join the rest of the scientist and their families below ground. This would be a mere formality, as both Nick and Jiaying fully understood that ten stories below the ground would be insufficient. It was either a massive burden or an unquantifiable relief, thought Jiaying, to be one of the few people on Earth to fully understand the implications of the current crisis, for if the solar eruptions continued unabated, she was ninety-nine per cent certain that there would be no planet left. She spoke with Nick about maybe staying above ground and even sitting on the roof of the building to witness what would surely turn out to be the greatest light show ever seen.

The Aurora Borealis and indeed the Aurora Australis were lighting up the sky during day time and night time. When the previous solar flare erupted from the surface of the sun, the solar wind took just fifteen minutes to reach the Earth and the entire sky lit up with dancing beams of green light. People around the planet, many of whom had no idea as to the potentially destructive power, looked skywards at the magnificent display, cheering and whooping with every pulse of light. Stephan was one of them, looking up at the morning sky over London, hoping that Oli and the crew were onto it. He’d tried contacting the ship, but to no avail, for some time now and was beginning to worry. After all, if Oli and Robbie weren’t around to fix the sun, who else could do it? In the back of his mind, he couldn’t help but relive the events of the previous month. If he hadn’t met Oli on the plane to Cairo, he wouldn’t have taken him to the pyramids and Oli wouldn’t have been transported down into the waiting spaceship. But then again, he mused, if he hadn’t taken Oli to meet his destiny, the world would have probably been wiped out by the asteroid that the Annenians had sent on a twelve-thousand-year collision course to test their creation’s ability to stop it. On the one hand, he pondered, he could be responsible for the annihilation of humanity, and on a similar if not completely identical hand he could be singularly responsible for its survival and indeed progression to its next evolutionary path. He was going to need some assistance with this quandary, so he opened a fresh bottle of Absolute.

The President, or rather Jerry Wright, had decided that the population needed to be informed of the potentially destructive force that was about to be unleashed on their planet, so President Daniels had gone live to the nation and most of the world to explain the sun’s little temper tantrum. He informed the people of the world that they should get as far below ground as was possible. He declared martial law within the confines of the United States and most world leaders followed suit. If the printing presses of the world had been able to print anything, they would probably all have printed the look on the President’s face as he gave the address. It was the look of a very small animal caught in the headlights of a very large truck. But since it was only going out on the emergency broadcast frequency, Jerry Wright figured that he would probably, once again, get away with coming up just a few yards short of a home run. Jerry liked the President but not in the manner that you should admire your Commander in Chief; more in the way that he loved his rather idiotic and slightly ancient Labrador called Henry, who never quite managed to make it outside the house for toilet time. Jerry had pretty much single-handedly organised the entire planet through a total shutdown of all power and control systems. The President had finally managed to polish out a mark on his desk that had perturbed him for the last few hours. Following the address that he gave the nation and with the massive army presence, the streets were completely empty. Only a few unfortunate soldiers were in attendance outside the White House when the small black craft

appeared from nowhere and made a rather unprofessional, slapdash landing on the lawn. They moved towards the craft from all corners of the property with their guns raised just as an opening appeared in the side of the ship and a ramp extended to the perfectly manicured lawn, adding to the divots that would surely cause massive conniptions amongst the devoted gardening staff.

As one, the elite fighting unit dropped to their knees and directed their weapons towards the top of the ramp just in time to see two massive feet attached to two equally massive armour-clad legs step into view.

“This is more like it,” thought Grrgrhacks, as he sauntered down the ramp in a hail of harmless projectiles.

He’d seen the planet from afar. It would have been, in his opinion, rather tricky to hide such a bright, ugly planet from view. But as he entered the atmosphere, he began to wonder if anyone was home. The streets were empty, there was no sign of electrical activity. On his previous visit he’d learnt that the inhabitants harboured similar passions for violence and destruction as did his own people, but he wasn’t fired upon. This was quite fortunate really, as he had no idea how to activate the crafts shielding, if in fact it had any.

Had they discovered his arrival in their solar system and hidden deep underground? Wise, but cowardly. Had some of his crew survived the destruction of their ship and found their way here to claim their prize? Unlikely, since he’d disabled all the escape pods except for his own. After all, he couldn’t have anyone reporting back to Throwgus how he’d been defeated by a scrawny runt. He attempted to unravel the mystery in his mind as he reduced Uncle Sam’s best to nothing more than clouds of plasma. According to the rather limited information that he’d recovered from his hand-held device, this was the centre of operations for the planet, so surely there should be more activity.

Time to dig.

The strangest part of space walking inside the void between two points of a star bridge, is the fact that your body appears to occupy two or more places at once. Obviously, there was no way that they could have known this in advance, seeing as Oli was the first living creature in the history of this universe who had undertaken such a challenge.

They had located the rogue Graviton Generator drifting through non-space, perfectly happy and unaware of the trouble that it was causing. This was no mean feat considering that their hands and the controls of the ship were about two hundred metres away from their faces, and their voices sounded like a slowed down and reversed recording of a Bjork single.

Probably a more truthful account of proceedings would have been that Robbie located the Graviton Generator and managed to instruct the crew as to their tasks by dint of the fortuitous happening that they were all wearing their NFS headsets. But once again, truthfully, Robbie had instructed them to wear the headsets as they were entering the rift just so that he could communicate with them whilst they were experiencing the strange distortions within the star bridge. So, as his circuits stretched, and his perception of reality became even more skewed than usual, Robbie gave himself a little pat on the back for being quite the most astute artificial intelligence that he’d ever had the pleasure of working with.

Once the ancient, but nonetheless fully functioning Graviton Generator was located, Robbie brought the ship to a dead halt right next to it. As the ship halted its forward motion, the rather disturbing effects of elongation also ended, and Oli’s head and hands re-joined his body. The rest of the crew emerged from the time tunnel and immediately checked their appendages to ensure that they hadn’t left any behind.

“I’m just going outside to plant the charges,” said Oli, leaping from his seat and immediately finding himself hovering just above the floor whilst at the same time being half-

way across the control room and in the lift on his way to the observation platform. Each instance was perfectly discernible from the others, but it was also very apparent that it was happening at the same moment.

“Hey guys,” questioned Oli, not sounding particularly convinced of anything, “did someone spike my drink, because there are some weird goings on?”

“I believe it’s just an effect of our current stationary position within nul-space Oli. I am also very aware that I can be in several parts of the ship in the same instance.” Robbie sounded as though he was moving his hand in front of his face and watching his fingers trail.

“Can’t you do that anyway?” asked Julie, always the pragmatist.

“Oh yes,” said Robbie, “you’re absolutely right. But that small fact aside, I must concur with Oli. There is some weird fluff going down here.”

Ed decided that he should try and contact Arnus to make sure that everything was OK at his end of the string, but before he could complete his move across the console, Arnus’ reply appeared on his screen and he found himself stood at the food machine holding a cup of karfee. He looked down at the karfee then across at the rest of the crew, minus Oli who was already drifting through sub-space and taking a dump in his room at the same time, and then headed back to his position where he arrived to find himself typing out a message to Arnus, asking if everything was OK. This was beginning to confuse the bejesus out of him.

“I strongly suggest,” he said to the girls, trying not to move a single muscle except for the ones that were required to form the words, “that you remain perfectly still.” But it was too late for Sara, who’d made the fatal mistake of reaching down for her bag which contained her sketch pad. She had to make a sketch of Oli floating in space/time. She pulled her sketch pad from the bag but when she looked at the first drawing, she was horrified to find a caricature of her most hated teacher, Miss Wheatgerm, staring back at her. She remembered drawing the hideous likeness during one of her most loathed history lessons, but that was four years ago, and that sketch pad was in her parent’s loft. But the real surprise came when she looked up from the pad to see her reviled old mistress peering over the top of her spectacles across the navigation console, straight into her eyes. She nearly jumped out of her skin and flung her sketch pad over her shoulder just in time to see Julie leaning across from her slot in the star-shaped console handing her pad back to her.

“Woah.” said Sara. “Ed’s right ... don’t move ... don’t think and don’t, whatever you do, look at Oli.”

Instinctively the other two lifted their eyes towards the screen to see Oli slowly spinning through space as naked as the day that he finished school. Sara and Julie were sharing the same thought. The back was bad enough, but if he continued to spin at the same rate, any second now they were going to be presented with Oli 2. They both looked away but in perfect synchronisation, turned their heads just enough so that they could just make out the screen in their peripheral vision. They let out a joint “phew” as they saw Oli fully clothed and waving towards the ship. Ed didn’t seem fazed, but then again, he did live with Oli and it was not uncommon for Oli to leave the bathroom after a shower wearing nothing more than a smile.

Everyone emptied their minds and remained perfectly still as Oli reached the Generator and cautiously, as though he were handling a Fabergé egg, placed the charge deep inside the casing of the fifty-thousand-year-old piece of equipment.

“I’m just going outside to plant the charges,” said Oli, leaping out of his seat and heading for the lift. This would have been fine if everyone had forgotten about the previous thirty minutes, but it was as clear as air, even to Oli who didn’t want to say I’m just going outside to plant the charges and if he’d had any say in the matter, he almost certainly would not have uttered those words.

The third and fourth circumnavigation of the same sequence of events were trying, to say the least, being only dissimilar to the previous one in the way that one pea might be if it suddenly found itself in a pod of dolphins. They had no control over the actual period of time that was repeated, but they could influence each passing second in ways that, by the time they reached the fifteenth passage, had become both extravagant and somewhat disturbing.

Oli, realising that he had no choice but to travel back and forth to the Graviton Generator, had located a comfortable chair and was currently drifting through non-space, reclined with a pipe and slippers.

“Well, if you’re going to be stuck in an endless loop for all eternity,” thought Oli, “you might as well be surreal about it.”

Julie was hard at work with a slightly muddled artificial friend, trying to find a way out of their predicament. She suspected that Ed and Sara had snuck off to discover more grown up experiments with space/time. Julie had long had her suspicions about those two and when they were back in reality she planned to have some serious words with them.

Robbie suggested to Julie, between random outbursts of artificial intelligence non-logic, that they were stuck in a temporal whirlpool that had formed around the Graviton Generator. With each passage of the vortices through the structure of Cranus, came another chance to experience the same period as before, but with the added idiosyncrasy that each person had complete control over their actions, except for Oli who, having left the confines of the ship, had got himself deeply locked into the motion of the time funnel. Robbie was sure that he would be able to move the ship away from the temporal effects; but if he did so whilst Oli was outside, they might lose him forever. He suggested that they should wait for the start of the sequence where Oli appeared in his seat. Then Julie would have to pounce on him and hold him down while Robbie moved the ship away.

The first few attempts were considerably below successful, as Oli seemed to disappear every time that Julie got close to him. Ed and Sara entered the bridge looking rather too smug and the three of them surrounded Oli’s seat and waited for him to re-materialise. Following several failed attempts where one or all of them had ended up materialising in completely random parts of the ship, they found themselves all gathered around Oli’s seat at the start of the temporal loop. When he reappeared, they all lunged together and ended up standing at completely opposite ends of the bridge scratching their heads. It was almost as though some mischievous time pixie was messing with them.

As they were all walking back towards the centre of the room to try one more time, the lift doors opened and in walked Albert Einstein.

“Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one,” he said, in his fabulous Austrian accent. He walked casually across the control room to one of the work stations and started tapping away at the keyboard. He paused for a few seconds to turn his head and offer a penetrating stare towards the rather perplexed crew members. “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Shall we see if we can end this before the logical conclusion is reached, hmm?”

At almost that precise moment, give or take a nanosecond or two, Oli reappeared and was immediately surrounded in a force field. Every time he went to leap out of his seat, the force field pushed him back. Julie wanted to rush over and help him because he was showing obvious signs of displeasure, but Albert insisted that they all remained exactly where they were whilst he attempted to move the ship out of the temporal tornado.

“OK,” said Albert, “we have moved outside of the affected area.” The force field around Oli was released and everyone breathed a sigh of relief, including Albert.

“Why is Albert Einstein still here?” asked Sara.

“It’s the drone,” said Albert. “This highly localized distortion in time and massive confusion in gravitational cohesion is the reason that the drone has been struggling to

maintain any kind of shape for the past few days. It's spilling out of the sun and polluting the entire solar system. Just as well that there aren't any unprotected artificial intelligence units or early generation Graviton Generators anywhere nearby, huh?" Albert seemed to wait for a response, but then gave up and continued. "Because ships would be falling out of the sky all over the place and drone work forces would be seriously letting the side down."

Oli was slowly coming to grips with the facts of his whereabouts and he placed his long-stemmed briar pipe on the side of the seat, gave it a few cursory glances and asked Robbie, "How in the name of ... What the ...? I'm wearing slippers!"

A few seconds passed as he raised one foot to show everyone the rather atypical footwear. He'd never even once in his life considered purchasing or wearing slippers. But as he placed his foot back on the floor and took a couple of tentative steps he suspected that they might just become a regular feature of his scant apparel.

"So, how are we going to get the charge onto the Generator without getting locked in that weirdness again? because I don't know about anyone else, but that was more than enough mental for me for one day."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ed, winking at Sara. "Some of it was kinda cool."

Julie just tutted, and Oli looked mystified.

"Did I miss something?" he asked.

"I'm going to leave a drone behind with a plasma charge and when we are clear of the star bridge, it will tug on the string signaling Arnus to detonate his explosives, and after a brief pause that cannot be measured in human understanding, it will detonate the Generator, thus destroying it."

Albert, who was now sporting Roberta's lower half, shifted his weight onto one hip.

"That's wrong," said Ed, looking at the crazy scientist/sexy woman hybrid, to the agreement of all present including Albert.

"But the drone will be destroyed," said Oli.

"The drone is a machine," said Einstein through pert red lips. "It'll do whatever is required of it. It is not sentient Oli. Any attachment that you have formed is purely anthropomorphic."

Albert suddenly fell apart and began to reform as a one-metre-tall blank drone. It took a couple of attempts before it managed to maintain its shape, at which point it began to glow bright white and give off some serious heat, causing everyone to turn away.

"The nano-drones are fusing together so that they can't be fragmented by the gravitational confusion."

"Oh," said everyone present.

A few minutes later they watched as the drone left the confines of Cranus and glided towards the wayward Graviton Generator, trailing the string behind it.

A trail of sparkling dust appeared to vent from every part of the drone as it entered the temporal vortex.

"The gravitational time shift is attempting to break it down into its components," said Robbie. "But the powerful bond that the drone has established is drawing the nano-drones back together."

The cloud of glistening matter began forming arcs around the figure and re-entering the body at different points, and still the drone pushed on towards its goal. They all breathed a sigh of relief as finally the drone placed the charge deep within the Generator housing and locked its arms around a section of the casing. This was a one-way trip for the drone. It was too risky to expect a detonation signal to penetrate the star bridge and reach the charge from outside, so the drone would remain behind and the very instant that it detected the collapse of the star bridge from Arnus' side, it would detonate its charge.

Robbie flew the ship towards the sun-side vortex but kept the screen glued to the drone, clasped to the structure of the Generator like a child's toy bear. A tear came to Sara's eye as she watched their gallant savior prepare to meet its untimely end.

"It's ... a ... drone!" shouted Robbie, possibly still with a little work to do on his empathy circuits. He switched the screen to forward just as Cranus's bulbous nose contacted with the point of the swirling cloud. The now all-too-familiar jolt occurred as the vortex gripped Cranus's hull, and in no time the screen was filled with the blazing inferno that they knew signified that they were once again entering the sun.

Arnus and his parents were beginning to tire. The first night without sleep had been a doddle. They sat on the porch with the string attached to the pulley for their door bell. If the string was pulled, then the old metal spring-loaded doorbell would ring. The great ship's computer person had warned them that the passage of time within the star bridge may not correspond to normal space, so they would have to remain alert whilst waiting for the signal. But as the second day ended, they realized that they would not be able to remain alert for much longer, so Arnus placed a call to Commander Shhti Jaad requesting her immediate assistance. She arrived within the hour with two of her subordinates, listened to Arnus' fantastic story and without a single intimation of doubt, set about creating a watch system of two people on duty for each two-hour period. Against her orders, Arnus decided to pitch his camping bed on the porch so that he would waken if the bell sounded.

"Such a shame," said Shhti, as she sat with Arnus in the swinging bench looking out towards a scene of utter tranquillity. "We could have learnt so much from them and now we must destroy the only evidence that our forefathers ever existed. Such a shame."

Arnus had told her everything, except for the gift of knowledge that had been bestowed upon him.

"Not exactly," he said, figuring that now was as good a time as any, and certainly in as good a company as he could hope for. "I've got it all in here." He tapped the side of his temple with his fifth finger and smiled at Shhti.

"How do you mean?" she asked.

Arnus told her how Robbie had placed all the information that they required to bring them up-to-date with Annenian technology.

"Apparently, it's on a time release so that my brain doesn't pop, but over the next few years as I grow older, we will be able to build ships that will take us out to the stars." He emphasized the point by raising a hand to the distant stars then looked back to Shhti for a reaction.

She was perfectly still, looking out to space with her mouth open.

"Commander?" asked Arnus.

She jolted out of her dream state and turned to face Arnus. His little green heart skipped a beat as she took hold of his hands and wrapped them in the warmth of her own, "You do realise what this means, don't you Arnus?" she whispered.

That I'm finally going to get laid? thought Arnus.

"That you are now the most important Phorissian alive and that you must be protected at all cost."

She didn't want to frighten him with scare stories, but what if he was killed in a crash or murdered by a lunatic? Then the knowledge would be lost forever. She drifted deep into thought, wondering what kind of life he was going to have. He would be under permanent guard, he probably wouldn't be allowed to travel by air and he certainly wouldn't be going up in any of the spaceships that he designed. Arnus had a good idea what was going through the Commander's mind because he'd been running the same thoughts through his head for the last two days and nights. In a flash, he reached down and grabbed Shhti's gun,

which was an electromagnetic stun weapon. He leapt off the porch, turned to face Shhti and put the gun to his head. Before she could do any more than thrust her hand out and begin to shout NO, he'd pulled the trigger. The weapon was usually used to incapacitate felons. Aimed at the torso it would overload the central nervous system of the target and render them harmless for a few minutes. It was never aimed at the head because it had been found when targeted in such a way to cause more permanent damage. The arcs of electromagnetic energy circled Arnus' head, extending tendrils down his neck and covering the top half of his body with prancing fingers of light. Shhti looked on with a combination of horror and perplexity as he kept the trigger depressed until the charge was exhausted. As the gun fizzled to a halt, Arnus lowered it and walked back to sit next to Shhti once more.

"So, you see," he said, spinning the gun in his hand and returning it to her butt first, "You really don't need to worry about my safety. That's all been taken care of." He showed her the ring that he wore on his finger and assured her that nothing on Phorissi, or if Robbie was to be believed, nothing in the known universe, could harm him so long as he was wearing the ring. As Shhti's heartbeat slowly descended from critical, Arnus could make out anger, relief and aggression on her face all at once, and decided that she was much prettier when he hadn't just stolen her gun and shot himself in the head with it. She raised her hand, fifth finger pointing straight at Arnus and opened her mouth to shout...ding, ding, ding, ding.

"The bell!" shouted Arnus, and grabbed the detonator from the table in front of him. Without hesitation, on the final ring of the bell, he pressed the button and a bright flash lit up the night sky over the forest, casting tree-top shadows across the entire landscape. Just a few seconds later came the rumbling blast and shock wave that rattled the windows of the house. Arnus instinctively turned to look at the vortex just in time to see it collapse in on itself and disappear without trace.

"That's the end of that then," said Arnus, realising that he would never see his new friends again. He reached up and pulled the piece of string expecting it to be falling from the sky, but it wasn't. It was solid and resisted his tug.

"Help me," he said, and Shhti grabbed hold of the string in front of Arnus. Together they both pulled with all their might until, without warning, it gave and they both fell flat on the porch. Well more accurately, Shhti fell on top of Arnus.

She leapt to her feet and offered a hand to Arnus. "Are you OK Arnus?" she asked. Arnus just waved his ring finger at her and she breathed a sigh of relief. Arnus just breathed a sigh.

In the night time glow of Amphora, their gaze followed the string into the sky until it disappeared, and suddenly as though it had burst through the fabric of space, a small shape plummeted towards the lake. Following a descent of some five seconds, it splashed into the crystal-clear waters creating perfectly concentric circles of waves across the otherwise mirror-smooth water.

"What now?" asked Shhti, fearing that some other hideous monster had dropped through to create chaos on their Moon.

They didn't have to wait long before a torpedo-like object began crossing the lines of waves, heading for the bank just below the surface. Arnus snatched his dad's rifle from its leaning position on the porch and they ran down the hill towards the edge of the lake. The shape under the water had slowed as it approached the bank and just as Arnus and Shhti arrived, it stood up and walked out of the water. Shhti had her completely useless weapon pointed directly at the blank grey form, but Arnus had dropped the antique gun and was holding out a hand to greet the figure.

"It's the drone," he said, turning to beam a smile towards Shhti. "It's from the Annenian ship." He turned to face the drone again.

"What happened? Why are you here?"

The drone merely shook its head and pointed towards its lack of mouth.

“It can’t talk without Robbie,” said Arnus.

Then the drone looked past Arnus and spied something on Shhti’s belt. It reached past Arnus and Shhti immediately backed away.

“It’s OK,” said Arnus. “I think I know what it wants. Your comms pad.”

Shhti removed the small flat device from the pouch on her belt and handed it to the formless machine. The drone held it in its hand with the screen facing Arnus and Shhti. Text appeared on the screen.

We were blown away from the explosion and thanks to your quick reaction we managed to avoid being spread throughout non-space as the bridge imploded from both ends. We are here now and will remain here to assist you in the development of the new technology.

“My very own robot,” said Arnus, rubbing his hands together.

Drone, wrote the drone.

“You are going to be popular when you go back to school, aren’t you?” said Shhti, as they walked back to the house to await the rising of Arnus’ Mum and dad.

Go back to school? thought Arnus. I have the knowledge of the universe in my head. Why would I go back to school?

Cranus had emerged from the vortex deep within the sun, sending out another massive solar flare. As Oli flew the ship out of the sun’s corona, they watched the vortex continue to spin and react with its symbiotic star.

“Come on drone,” said Oli, under his breath.

If this failed, the star bridge would remain open and the gravitational forces would continue to spread destruction throughout the solar system. They hadn’t considered a plan B, because if plan A failed, in purely scientific terms, they were screwed. What seemed like an eternity passed and the vortex continued to spin, then without fanfare or overly-dramatized extravagance, it disappeared. The sun’s corona stabilised, and the sunspots vanished. It was as though it had never happened.

“Is that it?” asked Ed, almost sounding disappointed that the sun didn’t compose an epic fanfare for the star bridge’s finale. There would have been more reaction if they had placed a burning sparkler in a bucket of water. The phrase damp squib is not often used in conjunction with the collapse of infinitely dense worm holes inside the corona of a star, but it most certainly found a home on this occasion.

“Right,” said Julie, not wanting to waste any more time, “let’s find Grrghracksh and get our ship back.”

“I’ve swept the entire solar system,” said Robbie, “but there is no sign of Annia. There is however a recent Graviton trail leading to Earth.”

“Bowlarks,” said Oli, punching in maximum sub-light speed and heading away from the sun towards the flashing dot on the screen.

“Sara, you oaf!” shouted Oli, as the barren rocky planet appeared on the screen. “That’s Mercury, not Earth. Put Earth on the screen.”

“According to the navigation computers, that is Earth. There must be something wrong with the electronics.”

Sara frantically pressed every button in front of her, trying to locate the problem.

Following an excruciatingly elongated few seconds where the crew offered each other looks of disbelief, Robbie’s voice broke the silence.

“That is Earth,” he said gravely.

“It can’t be.”

“It is.”

“But where’s the sea and the green land?” Sara got up and walked to the screen to get a closer look. There were several sections of the planet that were raised above the rest.

“Highlight everything above four thousand metres,” said Sara, much to everyone’s surprise.

Robbie highlighted the areas in red and everyone gasped. The continents of North and South America appeared on the left of the globe and the unmistakable shape of Africa emerged from the uniform grey on the right.

It was indeed Earth.

UNIVERSAL BLUNDER

There was no doubting the facts. This barren rocky lump was Earth. They were too late. On closer examination of the sun and the stars, Robbie determined that a little more than four days had been lost within the time distortion. The solar flares, that had been levelled directly towards the once beautiful green and blue planet, had stripped it clean of its atmosphere, water and life.

“It’s gone,” said Sara, running her hand across the image of the rocky carcass. “It’s all gone.”

She looked back towards her friends who were all hurrying to join her at the screen. Tears were welling up in everyone’s eyes. Even Oli and Ed found themselves looking at the image through somewhat blurry vision, although Ed’s cause for distress was related to the sudden and immovable thought that he and Oli would now have to repopulate the human race with Julie and Sara. He figured he would keep that notion to himself for the moment.

“All those people, all those pretty things,” said Sara, struggling to come to grips with the horror.

“Mum and Dad,” said Julie, her arms almost crushing the life out of her friend.

“OK,” said Oli, “whilst this is not the most ideal outcome ...”

Even Ed balked at his friend’s understatement but allowed him to continue.

“We need to construct a temporal loop, a star bridge that begins and ends at the same point right here in orbit around Earth.” He started to rub the top of his head as though he were massaging the outlandish thoughts from his brain as one might encourage the last dribble of glue from a tube.

“Then we go through it backwards several times until the Earth becomes blue and green once more.”

“You’re talking about time travel,” said Robbie.

“I am indeed. It’s the only way that we can destroy the star bridge early enough to save the Earth.”

“Two problems that I can see with that plan,” said Robbie. “Firstly, if we destroy the bridge before we return from Phorissi, we will be trapped on Phorissi and unable to build the temporal loop.” He gave a few moments for that one to sink in.

“Secondly, and this is the clincher, we have no idea how to construct a temporal loop.”

“You might not,” said Oli, moving to one of the consoles. He began pressing buttons and moving objects around on the screen in front of him. He was totally immersed in whatever it was that he was doing, so immersed that he didn’t notice the rest of the crew gathering behind him, bemused by the incomprehensible collection of figures and diagrams that were now spewing across the screen. All the consoles around the bridge leapt into life as he hurled mathematical equations and three-dimensional diagrams around the room. If Robbie had been in possession of a mouth, it would have surely been wide open, and gormlessness would have been the look as Oli utilised every ounce of processing power available. His hands moved across the console in a blur of movement.

After a few minutes, he extravagantly struck one final button and the sequence of diagrams and calculations began sequencing on the main screen, faster than any human could hope to comprehend.

“Well I’ll be an Atari ST,” said Robbie. “Did that just come out of your very own melon?”

“Ah ... I believe so,” said Oli, struggling to convince himself just as much as anybody else.

“Well it looks to me,” continued Robbie, “as if you have just invented wormhole technology and time travel all in one go! I’ve run several simulations of your calculations and although they are covering ground that has not even been speculated upon, the theses are sound.”

“Da-daa,” pronounced Oli, with his arms in the air as though just completing a flawless presentation on the parallel bars.

“The Gooerds!” said Julie, an unavoidable tang of those bloody creators occupying her voice. “They put all that in your head.”

“Most of it was already there, apparently. They merely showed me how to access it and added a few extra bits, such as time travel and wormholes. Maybe they already knew that we were going to be too late to save Earth and wanted to give us a way of saving our planet. One thing is for sure, we must build this and give it a go. If it means that one part of us will be stuck on Phorissi while the other part lives here, then so be it. But I for one do not believe that time is so inflexible that it will prevent us from being in two places at once. If we go back just a few days, then you can send yourself a message Robbie, through the star bridge warning you of the dangers of the temporal distortion within the bridge. If we manage to avoid getting stuck in that loop, we will blow the bridge with days to spare.”

“But surely if we had managed to send that message, we would have already avoided the time loop,” said Robbie, struggling to come to terms with the fact that Oli seemed to be more informed on the subject than himself.

“No, because we haven’t done it yet. That will be a new timeline that has yet to be written, putting everything right.”

“It will take weeks to build,” said Robbie. “There are components here that haven’t even been invented yet.”

“Well, we have no shortage of time me old mate. And let’s face it, Earth isn’t going to get any more messed up, is it?”

“Good point. I’ll get the drones started on the more complex items.”

“Would someone mind explaining to those of us who aren’t in possession of a super-human, creator-modified intellect what in the name of Gooerd you are talking about, please?” said Ed, who had been listening to the conversation between Oli and Robbie, with slightly less than no idea whatsoever, what they were discussing. He assumed from the puzzled looks on the faces of the girls that they too were lagging a few paces behind absolute cognisance.

“We’re going to ...” Oli started talking, but then began to look straight past everyone towards the screen. They all shot round just in time to see a swirling cloud begin to form between Cranus and Earth. It was either forming directly on the bow of the ship, or it was thousands of kilometres across. The cloud began to rotate slowly, and great swirling eddies formed within the perimeter. Flashes of lightning lit up the gaseous mass from the inside bringing all the array of colours into view. The vortex was angled slightly towards Cranus, so they could see the darkness within. It was darker than space. But then several objects began to appear from obscurity. At first, they emerged from the dark as solid points at various intervals around the vortex, but as they emerged it was obvious that they were long limbs, moving and swaying with every interaction with the spinning cloud. As more and more of these tentacles appeared, it became blatantly obvious to all present what was about to materialise from this giant star bridge. Robbie and Oli were equally dumbfounded. The body of the great space creature squeezed itself from the rotating bridge and the cloud vaporised into nothing. Then without warning, and very much not under Robbie’s control, the screen changed, and two pointy heads appeared smiling from gill to gill.

“Gooerds,” said Julie, in a tone that didn’t entirely exude a feeling of salvation and deliverance from the compost heap in which they found themselves.

“Gooerds!” shouted Oli, with slightly more relish. Lurking in the background was an extremely shiny orb, about a metre in diameter, hovering just above the Gooerds’ head height.

George lifted his control pad into view and began entering various commands.

“Ugh oh,” said Julie. “Here we go again.”

The view changed back to the Gooerd’s ship/creature thingy which had stretched its tentacles as far as they would reach in a horizontal plain around the main body, and slowly it began to spin. As it rotated, it altered its position so that the base of the body was pointing towards the carcass of Earth, which immediately began to rotate in an east-to-west direction.

As the planet completed one full reverse revolution, they saw a great cloud of what appeared to be dust, appear from deep space and engulf the lifeless Earth. With the passing cloud, small patches of water began to form and random areas of green and brown spread across the globe. The cloud ended and although the planet didn’t in any way resemble Earth as they remembered it, it was less disturbing than the dead planet that had previously been filling the screen.

The space creature began to spin faster causing a blur of six-thousand-kilometre-long tentacles across the screen. As the ends of the limbs approached light speed they appeared to shimmer in and out of existence. Earth began to rotate faster and with the completion of another half-revolution, a similar if slightly larger cloud of matter came rushing in from outer space. This time it brought with it more of the ocean’s volume, refilling a large part of the planet’s seas. Much more vegetation returned, and the all-too-familiar and highly reassuring green hue was restored. The planet was, however, still sporting a ghostly pallor. The atmosphere was the first item to be ripped from the gravity well as the magnetic field had collapsed, so as the Gooerds forced Earth further backwards, the next two clouds of matter brought with them the true magic of the planet. The land masses took on their familiar shapes and the ice caps once again crowned the furthest reaches of the planet. They could now make out on the horizon the thin layer of air that once again hugged the surface of the blue and green planet.

As Africa passed the centre of the view once more, the planet was illuminated by great tendrils of green light surrounding the atmosphere and performing a cosmic ballet, the likes of which had never been witnessed before. Well, not by a young surfer and the rest of his band anyway. This indicated the return of the magnetic field and the protection that had failed under the inexorable onslaught of the solar storm.

The spinning of the Gooerds’ ship began to slow and with it the rotation of Earth, but during the following rotation about its axis as it decelerated there were several more displays of planet-wide Aurora and with each display, the Earth gained more richness in colour. The final detail to rematerialize was the cloud cover and as the Gooerds’ ship stopped spinning, the tentacles once again hung limply below the main body. The giant space creature looked lifeless and drained of all colour and the tentacles refused to even attempt to sway in the intergalactic breeze. Oli began to wonder if the act of reversing time had somehow killed the immortal creatures. Maybe they could only do it once, rather like a bee stinging someone’s arm as its final statement. If that was the case, they were looking at the end of the creator of all things. Well, all things in this galaxy anyway.

Just as Oli struggled to come to terms with the possibility that he had indirectly, or maybe even directly, caused the demise of the Gooerds, the screen changed once more to show the two pointy-headed grinning faces looking very pleased with themselves.

“You may send the signal to your other self now,” said George. So, Robbie immediately sent a galactic frequency message that only he would understand straight into the star bridge that had reappeared within the sun’s corona. The message warned him about the temporal whirlpool and instructed him to stay well clear of it and send the drone to plant

the explosives. He included in the message a detailed description of all the happenings of the last four days, including the arrival of the Gooerds. He also included several details that he would know that only he knew, such as the location of his private stash of Country Life magazine, and less than one second after that, the Gooerds destroyed Cranus and all therein, with one mighty ball of light ejected from one of the shorter tentacles.

Grrghracksh kicked in the front door to the White House with such force that it shattered into hundreds of pieces, scudding across the marble floor and ricocheting off the ornate columns.

“Knock, knock,” he growled, for no other reason than he’d intercepted a transmission of a John Wayne film as he was searching for Earth. When he returned to Throwgus, he was going to learn how to ride a charging Parak beast whilst firing a pulse rifle in each hand. The interior was as deserted as the garden. Where in the name of Orloff the Crap Kicker was everyone? He pulled the scanning device from his suit and turned it on. Sweeping through three hundred and sixty degrees, he determined that there was nothing living within the entire building ... but what was this? A shaft appeared on the screen, beginning about fifty metres in front of him and descending three hundred metres below ground, where, according to his scanner, it opened into a labyrinth of tunnels and large open spaces. Grrghracksh grinned horribly, as hundreds of life signs appeared on the screen. He casually strolled to the lift entrance and forced the doors open with his bare hands. Presented with the usual array of cables and pulleys he placed the scanner back into its pouch and reached into the shaft to grab a handful of the steel cables, then slid down the shaft at a considerable rate of knots, gripping the cables with one hand whilst drawing the pulse rifle with the other.

President Daniels was sat at his desk admiring the quality of the French polish when he was startled into action by a loud crashing sound followed by automatic gunfire coming from just outside the main entrance. He immediately slid off his chair and hid under the desk. Guards came running from all sections of the underground compound and set up a defensive stance in the main reception. They upturned desks and crouched behind sofas, with their guns trained towards the main entrance just in time to see the double wooden doors explode inwards followed by the two guards from outside in the hallway. Well, most of them anyway.

As the dark silhouette of Grrghracksh emerged from the smoke and dust and his drawling mouth extended to its limit, emitting a horrifying battle cry, the soldiers froze for a second, then targeted him with a hail of small arms fire. They were under strict instructions not to use anything more destructive in case they brought down the White House onto the President’s head. But it became obvious within a few seconds that the bullets were having no effect whatsoever on this creature. One of the men ejected his magazine from the weapon and punched a new one containing armour-piercing rounds into place. But before he had a chance to test it on the target, a bright green light hurtled towards him.

One by one, Grrghracksh eliminated the entire fighting unit and moved into the heart of the compound. People were cowering behind desks or running in the opposite direction, but Grrghracksh had no interest in any of those pitiful cowards. He had spotted on the scanner an individual occupying a very large space on its own. This was the creature that he really wanted to see. He headed for a pair of large double doors at the far end of the reception area, but before he was halfway there one of the puny creatures leapt out from behind a pillar and pointed a weapon at his head.

“If you want to go through that door, you’ll have to go through me,” said Jerry, unable to conceal his trembling hands. He pulled the trigger and the round bounce harmlessly off some invisible shield covering the monster’s hideous features. So, he emptied the clip into

the creature's head from three metres away and the creature just curled up the corner of its huge slobbery lip and pushed him away so hard that he hit a wall and slumped unconscious to the floor.

President Daniels was huddled in the foetal position when the doors to his room flew across the floor, bounced off the back wall and came to rest right next to him as he quivered under the desk. Whether it was because his favourite hiding place as a child was beneath his father's walnut Victorian writing desk, or because he was too stupid to realise otherwise, but he felt protected by his wooden surround. Right up to the point when Grrghracksh chopped it in half with a mighty blow and hurled the two pieces to opposite ends of the room. Grrghracksh tilted his head to one side and scrutinised this leader of men then reached down, grabbed hold of his jacket and lifted him up so that they were face-to-face. His putrid breath came in waves. But Grrghracksh put up with it to study the creature more closely. Why was the ugly creature from the giant space craft so powerful and this one that looked identical, so weak? he wondered. The other creature had survived a blow from his Grax and yet this one looked as though it would fall apart if he sneezed on it. Well, whatever the reason, this planet had a new leader now and had no real use for this worm, so Grrghracksh placed his other hand on the creature's head and was just about to twist it off, when he disappeared. President Daniels fell to the floor in a crumpled heap but was immediately helped to his feet by a rather wobbly, disorientated Jerry Wright.

"What in the name of God was that, Jerry?"

"I have no idea sir, but I think it's safe to assume that we are not alone."

Cranus edged towards the sun side of the star bridge and everyone watched as the drone placed the charge and connected itself to the Graviton Generator. Oli was prepared to space walk and place the charge, but for some reason that he wouldn't explain just yet, Robbie decided to send the drone.

"It's ... a ... drone!" shouted Robbie, as the girls shed a tear or two for the heroic mechanoid.

Cranus pushed its bulk through the vortex that would hopefully deliver them back to the solar system in time to save the Earth and when it was clear, the drone detonated the charge and the vortex vanished without a trace.

"Yeah!" cheered the crew, certain that they had destroyed the bridge before it could do irreparable damage to Earth. Oli flew the ship clear of the sun and headed straight for the flashing dot that Sara had placed on the screen. Following several minutes of sub-light travel, they could examine their home planet to confirm whether they had arrived in time.

"Oh, no," gasped Julie, slowly standing from her console and walking towards the screen.

"What is that doing here?"

She was pointing towards the giant jellyfish, floating in space next to the beautiful blue and green planet.

"Do you know anything about this?" she spun round to direct the question towards Oli, and a look of surprise covered her face as she realised that he was no longer there.

Oli recognised the neutral, dark environment immediately and if he hadn't, he certainly would have recognised the irregular slapping of oversized flippers on the hard floor.

"Gooerd!" he shouted, as they came into view. He dropped to his knees and with outstretched arms gathered them in for a good old Oli hug.

"What ... how ... why ...?" he began to burble, and Honey put her tiny hand to his mouth to silence him.

“You destroyed the universe,” she said, without a hint of malice or anger. Normally when Oli broke something, he would immediately realise from the tone of his accuser’s voice. But considering that the destruction of the universe was quite a sizeable charge with which to be inculpated, they appeared very matter-of-fact about the whole affair.

“Eh?” he asked.

“You built a faulty star bridge loop and created a void in space/time which instantaneously began sucking in all the matter within normal space. Firstly, it fed on your own solar system, devouring the star and planets within approximately three seconds of its creation. It then expanded to devour the galaxy, consuming every star and planet within three thousand years. Once it had managed to devour the black hole that lies at the centre of all galaxies, it had instant access to every other black hole within the confines of this universe. It finally, after several million years, finished off every piece of matter in the universe condensing it into a singularly dense sub-atomic particle containing every single microgram of matter that once comprised the known universe. Not to put too fine a point on it, you were responsible for the deaths of five hundred and fifty thousand quadrillion life forms across the universe and a collapse of matter equal to a reverse big bang.”

“Oops,” said Oli.

“Double oops, me thinks,” said George.

“So, how come you’re here now?”

“Well, as we told you before, Gooerds exist in a region of space governed by metaphorical physics, so from our perspective, the destruction of everything was merely implied. So ... we waited one hundred million years until the memory of your solar system passed us by and we built a time bridge back to this exact point to stop you from doing that thing that you did.”

“But why, and for that matter how, did I build a star bridge loopy thing?”

The Gooerd explained about the time vortex, the destruction of Earth and the signal sent from Robbie to Robbie. The only detail that they omitted was the destruction of the other Cranus. Well they couldn’t have two versions of the same band of klutzes wandering about the place. That could incur the same outcome as Oli’s hooky star bridge.

“Earth is OK, the star bridge is destroyed, and we can go home?”

“Almost,” said George, raising the control pad and pressing a button.

“What would you like us to do with this?”

An area of light appeared a few meters away and there, suspended above the floor in some kind of invisible tube was Grrghracksh, looking more than a tad beaten up. He had green blood running down the side of his head and one of his arms was turned at a very unnatural angle. He saw Oli and went berserk, struggling to move his arms away from his side and throttle his nemesis.

“What happened to him?” asked Oli, trying to figure what kind of creature could have inflicted such damage on poor old Grrghracksh.

“Oh, he got a bit lively when we brought him up here,” said Honey, “so I had to hurt him a bit.”

Oli looked down at the diminutive Gooerd and shook his head, wishing that there was some way that he could get a film of that action.

“Can’t you keep him?” asked Oli, still unable to bring himself to make the only sensible decision.

“We don’t want him,” said the Gooerds in faultless unison.

“Well, you made him.”

“He tried to throttle us the last time he was here, and technically speaking we only made the original organism that evolved into him over a geological period of time. There is a difference.”

At that precise moment a meter-wide shiny globe entered the space and glided silently towards Oli.

“Hi Oli,” spoke a very recognizable voice.

“Robbie?”

“I am he,” said the sphere. “I have thankfully had some one hundred million years to improve the storage and transport mechanism that I inhabit. If I may have my two pennyworth, I suggest that we cast Grrgracksh into the sun and be done with him.”

“Obviously one hundred million years isn’t long enough for you to learn that you can’t just snuff someone out because you don’t like them, eh?”

“He knows where you live; he can call his fleet and they will come and level the Earth.” Shiny Robbie seemed to ponder further considerations for a second or two then continued. “He’s horrible and he smells.”

“Still Robbie after all this time,” said Oli, patting the smooth surface of Robbie’s casing.

“How about this for an idea? We’ll build a cryogenic chamber big enough for him and put him to sleep. Then one day when we’re passing his part of space, we’ll erase his memory and drop him off on a planet where he can’t do any harm.”

“Sounds good to me,” said the Gooerds, who really weren’t happy about destroying any kind of life, not even an annoying oaf like this one. They looked at each other as the thoughts moved from one pointy head to the other.

“I’ll go back and tell Robbie to make his bed and you can transfer him directly,” said Oli, eager to get back to Earth.

“Already done,” said Robbie. “I must say it’s rather an odd feeling communicating with one’s self.”

“What?” exclaimed Oli. “You do it all the time. Who are you trying to kid? I caught you just the other day discussing the décor inside the cave back home. You were all a dither about whether you should leave it as bare rock or paint it a dark shade of terracotta. I sat there listening to you for at least five minutes.”

Robbie spun through one hundred and eighty degrees and with a slight hint of a thrown back head, if he’d had one, he glided into the darkness.

Oli pulled a, what’s his problem face at the Gooerds, and they replied with a knowing shake of their heads.

“He’s very useful about the place, but since he built his new, shiny body a few million years ago, he’s become a little OCD. You know, cleaning and forever tidying up behind us.” The Gooerds lent closer to Oli and whispered, “It’s like having a mother.”

Oli couldn’t prevent the snigger from exiting his nose. The thought of the creators of all living things in the galaxy being fussed over by an over-zealous artificial intelligence just appealed to his brain in every possible way.

“What about the little ship?” asked Oli.

“It’s docked with Cranus. We couldn’t really leave it on the White House lawn now, could we?”

“Brilliant,” said Oli, still deep down inside expecting a Gooerd-style screw up. “I should be getting back before the others start to worry. Are you guys going to wormhole out of here back to your time?”

“I’m afraid she used up all her energy creating the time bridge. It’s something that Gooerd can only do once every five hundred million years, so we are here now. We will sit in this spot and allow the galaxy to revolve around us. We will be within your solar system for the next three weeks and after that, you will not be able to find us as we will slip into interstellar sleep mode.”

“You called your ship Gooerd. Is it part of you?”

“We are all Gooerd and Gooerd is all of us.”

“Well that clears it up nicely,” said Oli, under his breath.

“Just one more thing,” said George. Reaching out for Oli’s index finger, he placed it on the pad at the top of his control panel and pressed a button. Oli instantly forgot everything that he knew about star bridges and time travel. But because he’d forgotten everything about it, he had no memory of ever knowing it, so there was nothing really to miss.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” said George, “but I firmly believe that it would be better for all concerned if you don’t go around building dodgy wormholes.”

Oli laughed and wholeheartedly agreed with the Gooerd. He made the sign of a phone with his hand against his ear and said, “I’ll call when his cage is ready. Great to see you guys again and thanks for fixing my slight boo-boo.”

“Slight ... boo-boo?” said the Gooerds, and George pressed a key sending Oli back to Cranus.

“Mister President,” said Jiang Wong, “we have no idea how, but all solar activity has ceased around the problem area.”

She had remained at her post with Nick far beyond the accepted safe point and had expected another solar flare that would almost certainly have breached the Earth’s magnetic field. According to the clockwork rate of previous eruptions, they were one hour passed the projected time. On closer inspection of the sun’s corona, they discovered that the close grouping of sun spots had completely disappeared. Magnetic readings were all within normal parameters and there was absolutely no reason to expect any further flares.

“Are you certain?”

“One hundred per cent, Mister President. You can give the all clear.”

She was obviously on the main screen, because she could hear the cheers coming from the other end of the line.

“That’s fabulous news, Professor,” said President Daniels, his voice still trembling from his encounter with Grrghracksh. Jerry Wright got to work immediately, notifying the governments around Earth that they could come out of hiding and turn on the power grids once more. The mobile phone networks, however, were going to present a somewhat more tasking problem. Many of the communication satellites orbiting the planet had been fried. They would be entering a world that was an entire generation behind the one that they had left behind. It wasn’t merely the mobile phone networks that would be disrupted; satellites had many different uses. Television, navigation, weather forecasting and even education would all be affected by the destruction of the satellites. It would take years to place new ones in orbit and a few people would become fabulously wealthy because of it.

President Daniels smiled inwardly at this thought.

“We’ve got satellite communication back, Mister President.” A junior communications officer called from the far end of the room, where an entire wall was covered with electronics.

“Is that possible?” asked President Daniels, not fully understanding the tasks that satellites performed. “I thought that they were all destroyed.”

“Well, they appear to have become undestroyed. Not all of them by far, but we have some satellite communication and GPS back online.”

It would have been impossible for the junior communications officer, even with his Harvard masters in electronics, to have detected or explained the cloud of nano-drones currently swarming around the orbital regions of space fixing the burned-out circuits and reloading the software to run them. Robbie had taken a copy of every single byte of information before leaving Earth. He’d even backed up the complete internet and every

server connected to it, just in case the computers were wiped. He would be extremely relieved to be able to delete that from his memory. There was so much gobbledygook floating about out there, it was starting to hurt his brain. But if he was ever in need of a slightly larger penis, then he had roughly two million reference points with which to begin the search.

“So, the sun is fixed, the satellites are well on their way to being able to carry all that useless information and Grrghracksh is sound asleep in the medical bay on Cranus.” Oli rubbed his chin in a quizzical manner. “I do believe its pub o’clock.” And with that, Robbie brought Annia down into the sea just off the Cornish coast and headed for the underwater entrance.

The little ship entered the smuggler’s cave and with an almost indiscernible clunk of the legs, settled into its parking spot. The laughter and chatter rang out through the tunnels as the side door opened and the ebullient crew exited the craft. Their joviality was however cut short by the asynchronous metallic clicking noise as a dozen automatic weapons were cocked and aimed straight at them.

Oli and the crew stopped dead in their tracks and surveyed the scene. Twelve heavily armed men were positioned around the cave, covering every angle. Doctor Branith and his assistant were sitting on chairs that they had brought down from the kitchen. Doctor Branith had an inane grin on his face and his assistant looked like he was about to burst.

“Don’t move a muscle,” said Doctor Branith. “I know about the rings and if you even consider trying to activate them, you will be shot.”

He slowly pushed himself out of the chair and walked towards the ship with his arms folded behind his back. Every step was a deliberate movement and every breath that he took reeked of him savoring the moment.

He walked up to each of the crew and removed the ring from their fingers.

“How did you get in here?” asked Oli. “How did you even find out where to look?”

Ed gave Oli a little nudge with is arm and using his eyes alone indicated an area of the cave that was unlit. They all squinted, trying to identify the silhouette of the figure in the shadows, but then the person began to move forwards and gradually entered the light.

“What?” was all that Oli could say as his “friend” Jay emerged from the shadows. “What?” he said once more, trying to come to terms with the obvious betrayal.

“I couldn’t let you keep it all for yourselves,” said Jay, in an extremely measured tone. He’d been practicing this speech for days.

“It’s for everyone, not just for you lot to play around with.”

Oli thought for a moment about explaining to Jay that humanity wasn’t ready for this technology, that they would use it against each other and that it would still be here when they were ready. But Jay had been there when all this was discussed, so he knew the reasons. He obviously hadn’t accepted them.

Suddenly Jay became more animated and his eyes began to water.

“I saw you and Ed surfing, that morning and I knew then that you would never accept me.” He moved a couple of steps closer. “I’ve tried to make you appreciate me. I’ve tried to get you to even notice me, but I don’t surf; I don’t lark about as much as everyone else. I’m just a boring accountant with nothing to offer but a head for numbers and a signed photo of Ussain Bolt.”

Even Doctor Branith was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He put a hand up towards Jay and was about to interject when Jay cut him off.

“You, shut it!” He was pointing at Doctor Branith but looking past him directly towards Oli. He turned over his pointing hand and wiggled the finger that was sporting the Go-ring. “You will have your moment in good time, but for now ...” he paused and took a deep breath and sighed, “just shut it.”

Doctor Branith backed away and held his hands up in submission.

Let the irritating little minnow have his say, he thought. He had waited this long to get his hands on the ship; a few more minutes wouldn't hurt.

"What on Earth are you babbling on about?" asked Oli.

"Oh, come on slow brain," interjected Sara. "Can't you tell when someone's completely head over heels in love with you?"

"What?" burbled Oli. "Who exactly is he talking about?"

"You, you Muppet. He's in love with you and because there's no way that he can have you, he's decided that no one can." She was staring directly at Jay as she said this. She was not waiting for confirmation, but just letting him know how she felt about his treachery with one of the most withering looks that even Ed and Oli had ever seen.

"What?" Oli spat the word out once more.

Julie and Sara looked at each other and raised their eyebrows in despair of their emotionally handicapped male counterparts and that was the last thing that either they or anyone else in the cave remembered about the weirdest event ever to pass them by.

"So why did Jay decide to hand over the ship to Doctor Branith?" asked Oli, over a pint of Proper Job, sitting around their favorite table in The Sailor's Arms.

They had all woken up sitting in their seats on Annia nursing a head that was usually associated with the downing of a heroic quantity of Proper Job. Following the gamma radiation pulse that Robbie had released into the chamber, everyone except Jay had been rendered unconscious for several hours. The drone had emerged from the ship and assured Jay that not even the Go-ring would help him in a punch up with Roberta. Many guys would have jumped at the opportunity to go a few rounds with the leggy facsimile, but Robbie had correctly hypothesised that Jay would back down. He removed the ring, handed it to Roberta and flopped down onto his knees on the dusty floor.

"What have I done?" he said, filling the palms of his hands with his sobbing face.

"Don't worry Jay," said Robbie. "I always knew that you were a bit of a dick." And those were the last words that Jay heard.

Robbie had spent the next few hours cleaning up the mess. He loaded Doctor Branith and George into Lieutenant Frazer's helicopter and flew them back to their base and deposited the soldiers a few kilometres away from their barracks. They would be asked many questions when they turned up heavily armed and extremely dazed, but they would have very few or maybe even no answers whatsoever, because Robbie had erased their memories for the entire day. "Well you couldn't be too careful," he'd concluded.

Doctor Branith and George would wake up in the back seat of the chopper wondering why the hell they were there. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Frazer would not be able to assist them in retrieving their memories. Robbie had thought long and hard about what to do with Jay. He couldn't very well erase every memory that he had of Oli and the crew; that was too ingrained. So, he wiped the previous three weeks from his memory and put him on a train to London. He would arrive there, still unconscious and eventually find his way back to his flat. There would be some troubling times ahead as he realized that his friends had disappeared without so much as a wave goodbye; but he still had his job to go back to and they could keep an eye on him from a distance.

By the time the rest of the crew returned to the land of living, Stephan had arrived, and they figured that the time had finally arrived to go and make sure that Harry's beer hadn't been unduly affected by the Earth's near-death experience.

"What ... who ... me?" rambled Oli. "Was Jay gay then?"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" shouted Julie.

"Could have been your lucky day," offered Ed. "Don't knock it till you try it."

They laughed the evening away, fairly convinced that all of Harry's stock had come through unscathed. The locals all crowded around the television, watching the endless reports of northern and southern lights. There was no mention of the satellites repairing themselves or the three-metre-tall alien ransacking the President's underground bunker.

Just another quiet night at The Sailor's Arms.

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Thanks for reading Oli's latest adventure, I hope you enjoyed it.
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