

Carl Derham

OLI

A VERY NEW MOON

CHAPTER 1

JOURNEY TO GIZA

The heavily conditioned air of the Oval Office was sliced by the sound of a telephone and the President picked it up.

“Yes, this is the President,” he said, leaning across the Resolute desk of the Oval office, consciously avoiding knocking over his cup of coffee for the second time that morning. The desk was made from the timbers of *HMS Resolute*, an abandoned British ship discovered by an American vessel and returned to the Queen of England as a token of friendship and goodwill. When the ship was retired, Queen Victoria commissioned the construction of the desk and presented it to President Rutherford Hayes in 1880. Although most presidents enjoyed the grandiose appearance of the desk, it was rather too ostentatious for this particular commander-in-chief. He just hadn’t got around to replacing it with a desk that would be less responsive to coffee ineptitude.

“Mr President?” The anxious sounding voice on the phone replied.

“This is Doctor Conway at G.A.S.P.”

“We have confirmed the trajectory of the asteroid 2534 Conway. It will cross the Earth’s path on the morning of February 14th. We believe that the probability of impact is 95%.” He hadn’t really wanted the deliverer of Armageddon to be carrying his own name, but you cannot fight centuries of tradition within scientific circles.

There was a silence that seemed to last forever.

“Hello...Mr President?” inquired Doctor Conway.

“Are you absolutely certain Doctor Conway?” asked President Daniels, “and if so, what are the implications?”

“We are certain of a 95% probable impact and the consequences are the total destruction of the planet and all living things upon it, Mr. President.” He continued, unable to hide the air of doom in his voice, tinged with a somewhat inappropriate level of excitement.

“This rock is 255 kilometres in diameter and it will split the earth open like an over-ripe tomato in two weeks. If anything survives the resulting shock wave and tsunami, then it will perish in the first half of the subsequent two hundred years of nuclear winter.”

The Global Astronomical Survey Project had been set up ten years before this incumbent had even thought of running for Congress. Following a prolonged lobbying effort by Doctor Conway and his fellow stargazers, it was finally accepted that the threat, presented by rogue astronomical bodies was tangible. Doctor Charles Conway acquired his PhD in Astrophysics at Cambridge and had spent most of his adult life trying to convince the powers that be, to take this problem seriously. Based in the Nevada Desert, they received and analysed data from fourteen observatories across the globe. Their budget was, in his opinion, inconsequential when compared to the very real danger that these nomadic rocks presented to the planet. Out of the millions of asteroids silently hurtling through space, they had managed to plot the course of about two percent. Most of these objects meandered harmlessly around the asteroid belt between the planets of Mars and Jupiter, but they had discovered an increasingly worrying number of rocks that for whatever reason had strayed into the inner solar system and would cross the earth’s orbit at varying intervals. They had begun tracking the path of the asteroid 2534 Conway, two weeks before. It had strayed out of the asteroid belt about two years before, probably after colliding with another rogue body, but had only recently become visible to Earth’s observatories. It was one of the biggest asteroids on record and was not really the type of thing you wanted careering through your solar system at over sixty thousand kilometres per hour.

President Colin Daniels had only been in office for two months. He was the son of a billionaire oil tycoon and was sitting behind that historic desk for one reason and one reason alone – to give more power to the oil companies and to stop the feeble minded tree-huggers from preventing further pilfering of the earth’s limited but highly profitable resources. He was an extremely amiable man with a good heart and an eye for the ladies that hadn’t been seen since Adam uttered the words, “mmm,

nice apple.” But the impending destruction of the planet was fractionally outside of his comfort zone. He placed the phone back into its cradle and began to rock nervously in his chair.

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Oli’s plane, the 7.45 from London Gatwick to Cairo, was due to take off on schedule. He loved to fly. Way up above the clouds, he could drift off into Oli World and imagine all the strange beings that inhabited the world of cloud below. If he hadn’t decided to become a drummer, he was certain that he would have trained to become a pilot.

He’d arrived at Gatwick airport two and a half hours before the departure of his flight, not because he had to check in, he’d already done that online, he was just very excited about the trip. He was lucky enough to be sitting next to the emergency exit. So not only was he able to stretch out his legs in the manner that he would if he were sitting in his living room watching his beloved Star Trek, but if there was ever a problem that required a hasty exit from the plane, he would be first in the queue.

He’d spent a few minutes wandering through the shops in the departure lounge until he realised that they were all full of tat, and so he’d settled down at a window that overlooked the runway and watched the unfeasible number of planes vying for their chance to leap into the sky and head for sunnier climes. Once he was finally seated on the plane, next to the window, he watched the ground crew buzzing around the wing like worker bees around the queen. But instead of feeding her royal jelly, they were loading her with tonnes of highly explosive aviation fuel.

Whilst all the passengers around him bustled to place their luggage in the overhead lockers, Oli imagined how he would be the hero of the flight, guiding people to safety and going back into the burning fuselage to rescue a beautiful young woman. Deep into the fantasy, they slid down the chute side by side, hands locked in the ecstasy of escaping certain death. Wreckage and injured passengers were strewn around them across the ploughed field that had become the final resting place for the stricken Airbus. Oli accompanied the young woman, whose name was Charlotte, to one of the waiting ambulances and she refused to let go of his hand, forcing him into the back of the vehicle with her. As they kissed in the back of the ambulance, hundreds of photographers grappled to get one shot of this laudable young man.

Oli was rudely pulled from his daydream by the oversized backside of a rotund woman pushing into his seat as she avoided another passenger attempting to shepherd his three unruly children down the aisle.

Please don't let them sit next to me, please don't let them sit next to me, please don't let them sit next to me, Oli silently chanted, his eyes shut tight in silent supplication. He really didn't want to spend the four-hour flight fending off the overlapping layers of the rotund woman as they invaded his narrow space. Nor did he relish the notion of the unruly brats kicking the back of his seat in an attempt to relieve their boredom during the long flight.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the maelstrom of discomfort passed him by and continued its journey towards the rear of the plane. He desperately attempted to retrace his steps to the back of the ambulance, but to no avail. That particular dream world was lost forever. Anyway, Oli knew in his heart of hearts that if this plane went down, he would be out of that door faster than a ferret down a rabbit hole. He wasn't a coward, but he did possess a very strong sense of self-preservation. He sat glued to the window as the aircraft was pushed back and then taxied to the runway. The engines whined and the edge of the tarmac rolled by increasingly fast. The overhead luggage compartments rattled as the plane reached its take-off speed. He had always thought it rather strange that people simply accepted the wisdom of sitting in an aluminium tube surrounded by highly explosive fuel whilst hurtling down a dead-end runway at over 200 kilometres per hour. He'd come to the conclusion that if you thought about it too much then you would probably never fly. He felt a twitch of excitement in his stomach as the nose came up and they climbed into the grey January sky. In no time at all, the cars and houses were transformed into insignificant little toys. Thousands of miniature people, hurrying about their daily chores. *What were they all thinking, where were they going, and what did they have for dinner last night?* Oli decided that not a single care could be given, because he was off for two weeks in the sun, away from the gloomy British weather and his even gloomier flat, in gloomy Fulham, set in the gloomy surroundings of gloomy London. But more outstanding than that, he was going to visit the most incredible feat of human engineering ever to grace this planet.

He had acquired an interest in the pyramids during the previous year. He'd never really been encouraged to read as a child. Even at school, he would only read the passages that were relevant to the next day's lessons, aimed at preventing a punishment rather than demonstrating any real interest in learning. But his latest girlfriend, Suzzy, who had sadly decided to run off with someone possessed of slightly greater ambition than Oli, was very much into the New Age way of thinking. She had persuaded him that much could be gained from spending a few hours a day engrossed in someone else's thoughts. Previously he would have spent those few precious hours carving through the backstreets on one of his various wheeled death traps, or listening to music whilst providing an accompaniment on his trusty drum kit. His recent love for books had somehow led him to discover the many theories that surrounded the existence of these great monuments, from the Egyptologists' point of view that they were constructed by their forefathers as great burial chambers for kings of old, to the out-of-this-world views of alien intervention and great civilisations lost in the mists of time. Oli just thought that they were an unbelievable achievement, whoever was responsible, and now he was going to see them for real.

Whereas most people would just sit back and take it for granted that we live in an age where flight is not only possible, but also commonplace, Oli fully appreciated the wonders of such an accomplishment. After all, it was only a short time ago that humans believed that manned flight was an unobtainable goal. Now he was speeding his way to Egypt in the same time that it would have taken those people to travel across London.

The plane reached its cruising altitude and Oli peered out of the window at the magical world of clouds. Mountains and valleys of downy vapour stretched as far as the eye could see. Oli thought how great it would be if he could get the pilot to drop him off, so that he could go exploring in this strange, yet somehow inviting land. He could just see, in the distance, a large peak of cloud with a hole through the middle and the sun's rays were shining through it as though lighting the entrance to a mystical kingdom. Another peak of cloud had taken on the shape of a barrelling wave, the kind that Oli took great pleasure in carving up with his seven foot gun surfboard, on one of his frequent trips to Cornwall. Oli was always accompanied on his surfing trips by Ed, the guitarist in the band and his flat

mate. They'd been enjoying the West Country for two years and had made many friends down there. Their favourite spot was a little village called St. Agnes, an out-and-out surfer's town. If you were not in possession of a surfboard in St. Agnes, you were either under five or over sixty and this rule was by no means set in stone. During one visit, he met an old local man, who following forty years of working as a fisherman, had decided to take up surfing on his sixtieth birthday. Obviously he wasn't carving the waves or performing flying cutbacks, but he was doing it. This really impressed Oli and he'd spent many an hour listening to Ol' Pat's sea-faring tales over an après-surf drink in the local pub.

He drifted off into Oli World for a while, unaware of the two immaculately presented stewardesses, pushing their trolleys down the aisle, to serve the hungry passengers their lunch.

"Would you like lamb or beef, sir?" the first woman asked. There was no reply. "Sir, excuse me sir, would you like lamb or beef for your meal?"

"Oh I'm sorry," said Oli, "Miles away. Ah...pork please."

"Lamb or beef, sir?" she repeated, without any hint of impatience.

Everyone who knew him, and that was a very large and diverse selection of people, loved Oli. He was the sort of person that inspired affection. He never had a bad word to say about anyone and was always game for a laugh. You just had to be prepared for things to take a little longer than usual. He wasn't intellectually challenged. He was actually quite bright, but he would suddenly and without any warning, drift off into Oli World, a fictional realm that his close friends had invented during one of his excursions.

"Actually I'm a vegetarian," he said, as he looked at the stewardess with that totally natural puppy-dog look that had sent many a young girl's heart fluttering. The vegetarianism was a new exploration for Oli. Suzzy had persuaded him to step away from the sausage counter and he'd continued down the meat-free path after she had dumped him. Throughout their short relationship, he had been guilty of cooking up the odd bacon sandwich, when he was sure that she wouldn't turn up at his flat and walk straight into the resulting haze.

Now, the stewardess could have gone into detail, about how he should have pre-ordered his vegetarian meal online, but she somehow appreciated that this would be pointless.

“I’ll see if we’ve got any meals for you in the galley sir. Let me serve the other passengers first.”

“Oh I don’t want to be any trouble,” said Oli.

“It’s no trouble sir,” she said, with a delicate tilt of her head and possibly the cutest smile that Oli had ever witnessed. She would definitely be the one that he would rescue. As she moved down the aisle, Oli turned to the window, pressed his forehead against the cool glass and continued his exploration of the kingdom of cloud. One minute or ten may have passed. He wasn't sure.

“Here you are sir,” the stewardess and her endearing smile chirped in. “We had one vegetarian lasagne in the galley. I hope you enjoy it.”

“That’s brilliant. Ta much.”

Oli took the tray, sporting several plastic containers. He lifted his gaze towards the stewardess to receive one more melting smile before she slinked off down the aisle.

Whilst carving into the somewhat bland, but nonetheless edible concoction in front of him, Oli’s mind drifted into the other dimension that he knew and loved. He could effortlessly wander into another realm and still perform necessary motor functions such as eating and rather more worryingly, riding his Piaggio scooter, but as the well-dressed man in his early thirties, sitting in the seat next to Oli discovered as he asked him how the meal tasted, communication with other beings was totally out of the question. He looked Oli up and down, noticing the loosely laced trainers, faded jeans and baggy T-shirt displaying a picture of an ugly fish with huge teeth. The man lent forward to peer around Oli’s long curly hair which had fallen over his face as he tucked into his food.

Nothing.

He gave up after two further attempts to communicate with the young man and continued with his meal. Oli hadn’t deliberately ignored him, but he was in the club where he’d spent the previous Saturday night, dancing in front of the most adorable girl. She was wearing a pink Lycra bra top and a skirt so short that it would be better described as a belt. He’d pressed his mouth against her left ear and shouted, “What’s your name?”

He moved back and she assumed the same position that he had previously adopted and shouted, “Sam. What’s yours?”

A further few seconds passed as they swapped positions. “Oli..” And that was it. They just danced for the next two hours. Oli always maintained that talking in a club is just too much like hard work. Best to just let your feet and arms provide the conversation. Strictly speaking, occupying the tender age of sixteen, Oli was not allowed into the clubs in London, but due to a combination of the facts, that his band had performed at several venues and that he was immediately adored by everyone who worked there, many backs were turned and a great number of looks were directed the other way. Oli and Sam had swapped phone numbers and arranged to meet again when he got back from his holiday. Had Oli’s understanding of female body language been anything other than hopeless, he might have realised that she was not ready to end the evening quite so briskly, but he had to see a girl a few times and just let it happen naturally. Of course, in club-land this usually meant that Oli never got the girl. But he was happy just dancing with her, watching her slender form shake and twist in front of him, even though he was hurtling across the sky at thirty thousand feet, eating a vegetarian lasagne and mange tout.

He bit into a piece of hard lasagne that had been baked solid on the side of the dish. Suddenly he was back aboard the plane. He turned to his right and asked, “How’s your meal?”

A group of Polynesian women in grass skirts should have appeared, bestowing garlands of flowers and singing “Welcome to Oli World”, but they didn’t, so the man in the other seat gave Oli a rather puzzled look and said, “Fine thank you. Yours?”

“Excellent ta. Best Lasagne I’ve had for ages.” Oli always insisted, contrary to popular opinion, that there was something rather special about aeroplane food. Whether it was because it appeared to be free, or because it was served in such a basic manner that it reminded him of camping when he was a young boy, he wasn’t sure. He just liked it.

“Oli,” said Oli, his right arm contorted across the arm of the two seats. His open hand was greeted by the hand of his neighbour.

“Stephan. Stephan Johansson.”

Stephan was slightly taller than Oli, helped by the fact that he was sitting perfectly upright in his seat and not lounging. He was wearing light coloured, neatly pressed trousers and the collar of his white shirt protruded symmetrically from the top of his woollen jumper. The total disparity with Oli continued to the top of his head, where his closely-trimmed hair perfectly crowned the ensemble of orderliness. Oli never judged people by appearances and could just as easily befriend a city banker as he could a penniless hippy living in a bus, although truthfully, he would probably spend more time with the hippy than the banker.

“Very pleased to meet you,” said Oli. “Have you ever been to Cairo before?”

Stephan gave Oli an amused smile.

“Yes, I actually come here quite often. I work for the Natural History Museum, in the Egyptology department.”

Oli reeled back in his seat and his eyes opened wide in a look of shock and disbelief.

“Now that’s a top job if ever I heard one. What do you have to do to get a job like that?”

“Well,” said Stephan, purposefully placing his plastic knife and fork on either side of the tray in front of him; “three years of study at Oxford, a one year placement working for the institute in Cairo, four more years studying for my MA, several trips to Egypt during the course of my studies, plus having an uncle who is director of Egyptian studies at the museum probably helped.” He smiled.

“How about you? Have you visited the pyramids before?”

Oli seemed to pause for thought, which amused Stephan. He assumed that he must have been joking.

“No,” he eventually replied.

Stephan found Oli a refreshing break from the stuffy academics with whose company he usually frequented. He talked openly about his work and his personal views on the origin of the pyramids. Having studied Egyptology for many years and mixed with hardened Egyptologists who could only see the one point of view, he should have been more narrow-minded, but he was really quite excited about new discoveries that threw doubt on the traditional teachings. Discoveries such as, the erosion on the body of the Sphinx, which could only have been caused by running water. He explained to Oli

that the last time there was such significant rainfall in Egypt was at the end of the last Ice Age, which would date the Sphinx back to 10500 BC. Oli listened attentively as Stephan shared a small part of his knowledge. The question that was itching to make its appearance might have appeared as though he was taking advantage of the situation, but it would have been sheer folly to let this fantastic coincidence pass him by.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way you could arrange for me to see inside one of the pyramids, is there?”

There, it was out. It was like releasing the safety valve on a steam engine that was about to burst a cylinder. He gave an almost infantile look, as if his entire face was saying ‘*pleeeeeeease*’.

“Yes, of course I can.”

Oli wanted to jump out of his seat and punch the air, but he managed to replace this desire with a simple, “superb!”

“At the moment it’s totally off limits to the general public, so you’ll have to be my cousin.”

Stephan was enjoying his new friendship. It was very rare for him to be able to relax with someone without worrying about appearances and other inane social graces. His small social circle was mainly connected with the museum, or part of his large and wealthy family.

“I’ve never done it before, but it’ll be fun to tell a few lies. Where are you staying?”

“I haven’t booked anywhere. I’m going to find somewhere when I arrive. Can you recommend anywhere?” He paused and gave a concerned look, “Er cheap. I’m not exactly flush.”

“Why don’t you come and stay with me?” said Stephan. “I’ve got an apartment on the outskirts of town, just ten minutes from Giza. I’ve got to work some of the time but you’re welcome to come and go as you please.”

Oli could not believe his luck, or the generosity of his totally brilliant new friend. In fact, his luck was even greater than he’d first imagined. Stephan usually travelled in first class, but this was an unplanned visit and the only last minute ticket available had been in battery class. He graciously accepted the kind offer and reached for the overhead button that would summon the stewardess. Upon her arrival he ordered a celebratory coke and Stephan ordered a gin and tonic. They both melted into

their seats as the stewardess hurled her trademark smile in their direction and as she walked to the back of the plane, they twisted their necks in unison to the point where the sinews would stretch no more. They moved their gaze back to each other and exchanged a knowing smile and a raise of the eyebrows that needed no words.

Oli, like most struggling musicians, had very little money, but when his mother had died the previous year, she had instructed her lawyer to place the proceeds from the sale of her house into a trust fund for him. He was given a monthly allowance, and he would receive the rest of the not-inconsiderable lump of cash on his twenty-first birthday. He bought a new drum kit and moved to the flat in Fulham with Ed. His mother was Oli's last remaining family member, as far as he was aware. She'd remarried following the death of his father and Oli's stepfather had made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the free living young man.

"The boy's a dreamer," he would say. "A good stint in the Army would soon sort him out."

A good stint in the Army! Oli would rather sit on a wooden spike whilst carrying an anvil than join the Army. He loved his freedom. The ability to do *as* he pleased, *when* it pleased him and thanks to the generosity of his mother's will, he was now able to do just that. His dream, like that of so many young people, was to be in a successful band and travel the world, but for now, they had to settle for the odd gig at small London clubs, usually playing to a crowd of ten or twenty friends and being rewarded precisely zilch for their endeavours. He knew many people with boring dead-end jobs. Jay, the bass player in the band was amongst them. He wasted fifty percent of his waking life absorbed in an activity that provided no pleasure whatsoever, looking forward to the weekend so that he could go out clubbing and forget all the tedious drudgery of the week. To Oli, that was tantamount to wishing your life away. Okay, so Oli had no career and no prospects, but at least he was enjoying every minute of every day. Plus, he was keeping his dream alive.

After a while, Oli introduced Stephan to the world of clouds. At first, Stephan thought that maybe he was a bit strange, but after a few minutes of staring past Oli, who had pressed himself into the back of his seat to allow Stephan full use of the window, he was totally immersed in cloud land. The three large Gin and tonics definitely helped.

When they left the plane, Oli explained that he would meet him in the arrivals lounge, knowing that he would be held up in customs as he always was. He didn't know why, but on the few occasions that he'd been abroad, he was always stopped and searched. Of course, he never had anything incriminating on him, but they always assumed that he would have. As he sauntered through the green channel with his beaten up rucksack, he was waiting for the wagging finger instructing him to approach the tables aligning the room. The search was a fairly light one this time. He recalled once, flying back from Amsterdam, the customs officers at Heathrow airport had given him the kind of inspection that previously, he'd only seen on the television show, *Vets in Practice*. He met Stephan in the Arrivals hall and they headed for the exit. As the doors to the airport swished open, he was greeted by that wonderful blast of warm air that denotes you are no longer in England. Cool inside and warm outside, in Oli's mind, was the correct order of things. They climbed into a waiting black and white Lada. Stephan uttered something that Oli assumed must be Arabic, to the driver and they raced off at a rate of knots that was unbecoming of the old banger.

Oli was used to riding his scooter on the streets of London so he knew a fair bit about bad driving, but he'd never experienced anything like this. At one nail-biting point of the journey, the taxi driver was overtaking a motorbike, which was overtaking a car, whilst on the other side of the road, hurtling towards them at a similarly ridiculous speed, another car was overtaking a bus. The taxi driver appeared to be blissfully unaware of the impending crunch. He made no effort to speed up or pull in behind the bike, he simply continued puffing away on his cigarette with one hand on the wheel and the other nonchalantly resting on the door. Somehow, and against all the laws of traffic flow, every vehicle managed to pass without incident.

As they drove through the middle of Cairo, Oli's head protruded from the open window, his hair cavorting in the wind like an over excited hound. *This was nothing like driving through London*, he thought. The driver had to make constant corrections to avoid various forms of wildlife that were trotting down the street. They drove past a bustling market, the deafening cacophony of shouting, music and drums, drowning out the noise that was emanating from the taxi's antediluvian engine. Stephan left Oli to take it all in as he himself had done on his first trip to this crazy city. When they

reached Stephan's flat, Oli congratulated the taxi driver on his ability to stay alive. The driver gave a gravelly laugh and sped off into the distance leaving a cloud of dust and cigarette smoke in his wake. As the cloud settled, Oli slung his rucksack over his shoulder and checked out the area. The apartment was set in a stunning oasis on the outskirts of Cairo. It was one of seven apartment blocks surrounding a green area with a large pond in the middle. Not at all what Oli had expected to find in this arid desert region. They entered the building through two sets of smoked glass doors. The outer doors opened automatically and as they closed behind them, the inner doors opened. Oli remarked that it was like an airlock. Stephan explained that the double doors helped to keep out the dust and heat.

The entrance hallway was floored with highly polished brown marble with outlandish pot plants adorning every wall. Not a single dead head or brown leaf were to be found on any of the plants and Oli gently squeezed one of the leaves to determine whether or not they were fake. They were not fake. Oli had never before seen such exuberant style. They walked to one end of the room to the shiny metal lift doors. The lift took them up to Stephan's seventh floor apartment and as Stephan dealt with the three locks, pushed open the door and stood aside, he gestured for Oli to enter. Oli's eyes made a path across the marble floor of the immense living room stretching to the patio doors which led to the balcony. As he elevated his gaze, taking in the room, the view from the balcony appeared, filling his head with trumpet fanfares. For there, in the middle of the patio doors, framed as though they were a giant oil painting hanging from a glass wall, were the three pyramids.

"Holy oly..." exclaimed Oli.

He dropped his bag in the corridor and slowly walked into the room, unable to take it all in. He had never seen anywhere so opulent in all his life. Not only was the apartment hospital clean and perfectly furnished, but it had the most incredible structure in the world as a wall hanging. Stephan picked up Oli's bag and placed it with his own next to a semi-circular black leather sofa. He watched as Oli was drawn by some invisible line towards the patio doors. He slipped in front of Oli and unhitched the latch, allowing him to slide open one side of the patio doors.

"Holy oly..." he repeated

I thought that's what he said, thought Stephan.

Oli stepped out and placed his hands on the balcony rail. He moved his head from side to side taking in the full glory of the vista.

“Do you like it then?” asked Stephan.

Oli turned round to face him and just uttered, “woaw!”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Stephan went back inside to unpack his bag. He remembered how long he had stood out there on the day, three years ago, when he’d come to view the apartment. It is a good idea to be a bit coy when regarding a property with a view to buy. It’s best not to let the seller know how much you actually like it. But when he saw this view for the first time, he would have paid whatever they wanted to make sure that it was his. His father was always very tight with money, to the point that he would make sure the house maid did the laundry after ten o’clock at night when the electricity was cheaper. Quite sad really, when you considered that he was one of the largest shareholders in the regional electricity company. Stephan had adopted the attitude; *if you’ve got it, use it.*

While Stephan pottered about hanging his clothes and putting the kettle on to make a pot of tea, Oli stood outside watching a hundred thousand workers heaving those twenty tonne blocks of sandstone across the desert floor.

“Tea Oli?” called Stephan, holding up an ornate long spouted pot.

“Woaw!”

Stephan made the tea and took it out to the balcony where, set to one side, there was a small glass table with two metal chairs.

“Isn’t it something?” said Stephan and Oli turned around, saw the tea and came to sit down.

“Totally awesome,” said Oli as he picked up the small glass cup that contained an amber-coloured liquid. He examined it and noted that it was lacking the floating, scummy film that always occurred when he tried to make black tea in England.

“I’ve got to go out in a minute to sort out a few things, but just make yourself at home. If you want to go out for a walk there’s a spare key hanging next to the door. Your room is the one on the left as you look out to the balcony. I’ve put your bag in there.”

“Thanks, Stephan. It’s so cool of you to help me out like this.”

“Not at all,” said Stephan. “It’s nice to have some company for a change. I’ll be back in a couple of hours and we can plan our little trip to the pyramid.”

As Stephan left the building, he realised that he’d just left a complete stranger in his apartment, but somehow, and he wasn’t sure how, he knew that Oli could be trusted. As the taxi drove him to the office, he searched his memory for the last person who he had trusted so completely on first meeting and came to the conclusion that there had never been anyone. It was strangely refreshing.

CHAPTER 2

DISAPPEARED

Night had enfolded the ancient landscape of Giza, and Stephan led the way through the compacted desert sand. He'd returned home after about two hours to find Oli, sitting in the same position, gazing out at the pyramids as the sun slipped behind the crimson outline of a distant mountain.

They approached the menacing shape of the pyramid of Khufu, some two million three hundred thousand blocks of stone, some weighing in at nine tons, piled one on top of another, the four sides of the pyramid aligned almost perfectly with the four points of the compass. Oli found that he was craning his neck more and more as they approached the entrance. The dark shape above was silhouetted in the minimal light that the half moon was providing. They climbed a hand-cut trail of steps to the entrance and in no time were standing in front of the dark hole that disappeared into the carved limestone.

"I hope you don't suffer from claustrophobia," said Stephan, with a knowing grin on his face. "This passage leads down to the unfinished chamber. It's a hundred metres long and it was obviously designed with children in mind."

Oli wasn't aware of any phobias. He would quite literally have a go at anything. They descended into the heart of the pyramid with the beams of their torches dancing on the stone walls around them. The passage was just over a metre high and a metre wide. The slope was steep enough to make the act of walking upright slightly awkward, but Oli found that walking in a doubled-up position was nearly impossible. There were planks of wood on the floor with pieces of batten nailed across them to give the walker something on which to purchase. On several occasions, Oli nearly lost his footing and had to brace himself on the rope railings that ran down either side of the passage. The second time he did this he knocked his torch against the stone and it went out.

"Are you okay?" Stephan shouted, shining his torch up the tunnel to see Oli braced against the walls, shaking his torch with a movement of his wrist and pointing it at his face. It flashed into life

again and he threw his head back and shut his eyes, blinded by the beam. This sharp movement caused him to lose his grip on the batten and he landed flat on his ass.

“Fine thanks,” he choked, pulling himself back to his feet and rubbing his aching rear.

Stephan turned, chuckling to himself and continued down. He had been down here many times and was well practiced in the technique and he was a good fifteen metres ahead of Oli.

“I’m just going to rest for a minute,” Oli said, as he steadied himself with his arms on the walls and his shoulders pressed against the ceiling. Stephan turned around to acknowledge him just in time to see Oli’s upper body disappear through the floor. It all happened too fast for Oli to scream, he just managed a sharp intake of breath and a stifled “Wha...”

Something very bizarre was happening. He could sense that he was falling. His arms and legs flailed around him seeking solid ground, but he failed to find anything solid under his feet or near his hands. He could see nothing but pitch black. He realised that he must have dropped his torch. He had no idea how fast he was falling, or if indeed he *was* falling. It seemed like a bottomless pit, but he couldn't feel any air rushing past him. The previous year, Oli had taken part in a tandem skydive for charity. He knew how a person was buffeted by the air when falling from a great height. This was not in any way similar to free falling. Eventually, after a period that seemed like minutes, but was in fact seconds, he relaxed, stopped his flailing arms and legs and just hung there, listening for any clues that would explain this most atypical occurrence. There were no recognisable thoughts going through Oli’s head, just total confusion. His head darted from left to right, up and down in an attempt to see something other than the pitch black that surrounded him. He wasn’t falling. Of that, he was certain. He wasn’t bumping into rocks and being smashed to pieces. Also fairly certain. He wasn’t lying on the ground covered in huge rocks that were slowly expelling his final gasps of air. Totally certain about that one.

*

The hole in the floor of the passage had closed as soon as it had opened, leaving Stephan alone, open-mouthed, with the torch trembling in his hand. His immediate thought was that the tunnel had collapsed. But when the small amount of dust cleared, he realised that there was no hole and no

debris. His mind was working in overdrive, organising the visual evidence into a completely incomprehensible mush. He hurried back up the tunnel to where Oli had been standing, dropped to his knees and began feverishly scraping the dust with both hands. The wooden boards were unbroken as they ran their course to the entrance above. He ran his hands down the corner between the wall and floor, looking for some sign of an opening, but there was nothing. The only evidence that Oli had ever been there was his inactive, shattered torch, the glass lens fanning out in ever decreasing fragments along the tunnel floor.

“Oli! Can you hear me?” he shouted, pausing for a few seconds to wait for the echo to fade. He waited a further few seconds for any reply, but none was forthcoming. No sound of stone hitting stone, and no Oli. What the hell was going on? One minute Oli had been there and the next he was gone. During Stephan’s time in Egypt, he had examined this tunnel in minute detail more times than he could begin to remember and had come to the conclusion that there were no doors, cracks or anything that could explain the incident that he had just witnessed. He froze to the spot, his head and eyes darting from side to side looking for an answer to the impossible riddle that had been set. He could feel a state of panic welling inside of him and the only thing that he could think of doing was to rush back to the surface and get help. He scrambled up the passageway on all fours, his legs slipping and his knees bashing against the wooden battens. He felt no pain as he removed a layer of flesh from his knees. On reaching the base of the stone steps, he tripped and fell face first into the sand of the plateau, picked himself up and ran.

*

Oli’s fall had only lasted about ten seconds, although the extreme level of weirdness had made it seem considerably longer. At the end of the fall he felt the same sensation as approaching your selected floor in an elevator. His feet gently touched down on solid ground. Or was metal? His legs gave way and with a bit of a thud he landed on his backside. Wherever he was, it was the darkest place he had ever not seen; and silent too. Everywhere has some kind of background noise, whether it’s the wind, birds, or traffic, but there was nothing. The only sound was his obviously accelerated breathing. He was also certain that he could hear his heart attempting to force its way out of his chest.

He couldn't make out any shapes or shades of grey. The faint movement of air that he had experienced in the passageway was also missing. He started looking round in all directions hoping for some clue to his whereabouts, but there was nothing. Placing his hands on the floor he felt cool metal, very smooth, like the door of a fridge. *Oh bum* he thought, *I've left a pint of milk in the fridge. It's gonna be walking and talking by the time I get home.* The idea of Ed going anywhere near the fridge during his absence, was inconceivable.

He held the palm of his hand out flat as he thought he could feel rain. *No* he thought, *not rain, it's not wet, and besides, I'm in the desert under a pyramid.* Was it the dust that had fallen into the hole with him, and was now settling? He decided to crawl a couple of metres to his left to avoid getting too much of the dust over him. He raised himself onto his hands and knees and started to crawl. There was a metallic thud as his head contacted a hollow metal case, and he decided to sit back and let the dust do its thing.

As he sat back, he caught sight of a faint red light in the corner of his eye. He turned his head so quickly that he jarred the muscles in his neck and had to bend his head down to rub the back of his neck with his hand. He slowly raised his eyes, still rubbing his neck and tried to focus in the direction from which the light had appeared. Two more lights had joined it, a yellow one and a green one. Traffic lights? He thought. He had no perspective of distance, or size for that matter. Then, next to the red light a row of smaller red lights appeared one after the other. He could now make out a faint hum interspersed with a random, almost imperceptible clicking noise. It immediately reminded him of the sound that his clunky old computer made when he turned it on. All his friends had the very latest in computer hardware but Oli had retained the same beaten up old Dell that he'd purchased from a friend, eight years before. It was probably up for an award by now for the most abused and antiquated PC in the whole of London, but it served Oli just fine.

More lights appeared next to the yellow and green ones and there was now enough of an ambient glow to enable him to make out that the lights were situated about five metres away from him and that they were raised about one metre from the floor.

He placed his hands on the floor and lifted himself onto his knees. Whether this was in readiness to run or to approach and examine the lights more closely, he wasn't yet sure.

Run? He thought.

"Where to?" he replied to his thought. Darkness surrounded him and he certainly wasn't ready for another clunk to his bonce. So inquisitiveness became the overriding drive and he tentatively approached the lights.

*

Stephan had reached the night watchmen's office on the edge of the plateau. He probably broke several distance records in doing so and on entering the office bent over with his hands on his blood-stained knees. He reeled for a second as he examined the sand-encrusted seepage.

"I need...to use...your phone," he gasped. He was rewarded with blank looks that would have taken both gold and silver in the first ever Olympic 'Blank Look' competition.

"There's been an accident. Someone's trapped in the pyramid!"

He reached inside his pocket for his pass and showed it to the two puzzled watchmen. They were sitting behind their desks, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. It was obvious from the mug stains on the desks and the overflowing ashtrays that this was how they passed the majority of their nights. One of the men reached out and nonchalantly slid his phone across the desk towards Stephan, who hurriedly picked up the handset and dialled the number for the Director of Pyramid Studies. He was an old friend and Stephan knew that he would listen to his unbelievable tale with an open mind.

"Yes?" came the deep gravelly voice that Jaff had perfected over years of chain-smoking the strongest Egyptian, unfiltered death sticks.

"Jaff, its Stephan," he croaked, desperately trying to catch his breath in the cigarette haze of the watchmen's hut.

"There's been an accident in Khufu. A friend of mine has disappeared through some kind of door into the pyramid. I know it sounds crazy, but you've got to come...and bring help."

If anyone else called him Jaff to his face, they would find themselves on the wrong side of a shovel-sized fist. His name was Jaffreisie, but if it was possible for a man as hard-edged as Jaff to

have a soft spot, then it was reserved for Stephan. He was of the opinion that his friend was nothing like the endless line of pompous English grave robbers with whom he'd had to deal for years.

“What do you mean, disappeared?”

“I mean disappeared, gone, nowhere to be seen. He was in the passage about fifteen metres behind me, heading for the lower chamber when the floor opened up, he fell in and it closed behind him.”

There were a few seconds of silence before Jaff's voice rattled the antique earpiece of the phone.

“Now I know you don't do drugs and you don't sound drunk, so I'd better come and see for myself. I'll be there in ten minutes.”

Stephan put down the phone and pointed at the two guards.

“You two, come with me.”

He paused as they took another sip of coffee and simultaneously lit cigarettes, whilst contrarily staring at Stephan. They hadn't understood a word of what he was saying on the phone. Just as well really, or they would have thought that he was just another crazy Englishman who'd had a little too much sun.

“Now!” shouted Stephan, gesturing with his hand towards the door. In unison the two men pushed back their chairs and followed Stephan outside where the remains of their World War Two American Jeep was parked.

*

Oli decided that curiosity might have ruined the cat's day, but he just had to have a closer look at the light panel. He was cagily sliding one foot in front of the other, with his arms outstretched, waving from side to side like an out-of-control somnambulist, making a painfully slow advance towards the lights, when the whole room lit up. At first, the bright light dazzled him and he put his hand over his eyes. Slowly, he began to crack his fingers apart and for the first time, was able to make out the very strange environment in which he found himself. He was in a room, about the size of his living room, and just over three metres in height. The end of the room with the light panel was curved in all directions and the light panel was set into a concave, sloping desktop, constructed from shiny grey metal, with just a few lights occupying the central part of the desk. Above the desk, following the

curve of the room was a giant, black, very blank screen. He twisted his head in a most unnatural manner to examine the rest of the room. The walls of the room were made from a lighter grey material with a matt finish. There was the outline of a closed door behind him. That was it! No furniture, windows, or any other feature. He looked up, wondering if he would see the tunnel that had transported him to this rather strange place, but if there had been a tunnel, it was concealed behind a closed door, the outline of which was barely visible. He spun back to face the direction of the curved desk. It had some symbols that he had never seen before printed across the top above the lights. Some of the lights were flashing and two rows of yellow lights at the top of the desk were slowly lighting up in opposite directions. The desk had three screens set into it protruding at an angle and there were two panels of buttons, one on either side of the desk, also with graphics that made no sense to him.

“Woaw!” said Oli.

“Hello Oli.”

The voice seemed to emanate from all around. It was soft, male and seemed somehow friendly, like a favourite uncle arriving with gifts for a birthday party. Still, Oli jumped and took a step back from the control desk.

“Who said that, and how do you know my name?”

“I am the ship, and I know *you*, better than you know yourself Oli.”

Now this is a bit odd, thought Oli. He had millions of questions all jostling for position to be first out of the mouth.

“Where’s my hat?”

“You weren’t wearing a hat Oli. Why don’t you sit down, try to relax and I will explain why you are here.”

With that, a small door slid open in the wall at the side of the control desk, causing Oli to run in the opposite direction for a couple of seconds before reaching the other side of the room. Oli wasn’t predisposed to unnecessary panic, after all, a level head was required to drop in on a thundering wall of water and ride it as far as it would allow, but he was really struggling to control his urge to go just a little bit loopy on this one.

He was half expecting a bizarre creature to emerge from the opening, but instead, a very comfortable-looking high-backed chair glided silently across the floor and came to rest in front of the curved desk. Oli cautiously approached the chair with an ever-increasing look of perplexity. The chair had no wheels, just a black rod extending to the floor and tapering to a single point. Oli wasn't sure about sitting on it. Surely it couldn't balance on such a tiny spike. He gave it a gentle shake, half expecting it to topple over. It felt solid, not even the slightest wobble. By this time, the entire desk had lit up. Strange symbols were scrolling through at great speed, apparently leaving the confines of the solid panel to hover a few centimetres above the shiny surface. He glanced at the unfeasible base of the chair, then back to the obviously, technologically advanced desk.

Would people who were clever enough to build this... whatever this is, make a chair that fell over every time someone sat on it?

He was beginning to understand that wherever he was, it was not anywhere built by people and was rapidly coming to the conclusion that if a race of beings from another planet, had built furniture that fell over every time someone sat on it, then they probably didn't present much of a threat. He started giggling to himself at the idea of an invasion fleet coming in to land on Earth, but every time their ships encountered the sort of turbulence that he'd felt approaching Cairo airport, everyone inside fell over.

"Ahem," the voice interjected.

Oli gingerly lowered himself into the grey padded material. The seat was firm, very stable and probably the most comfortable chair that he had ever sat on.

"Okay mister voice, my heartrate seems to have descended to a level where I'm no longer in danger of ditching. Let's hear it."

*

Stephan had returned to the passageway with the two guards. He located the spot where he had scraped away the dust with his hands and instructed the two men to search for any sign of a door. One of the men said to the other in Arabic, "I think the Englishman has been at the duty-free," making a drinking motion with his hand. The other man laughed.

“I speak Arabic perfectly,” said Stephan, in perfect Arabic, “and if you want to continue getting paid to smoke and drink coffee every night, then I suggest that you help me.”

They both reluctantly dropped to their knees and began scraping away at the dust. Stephan worked his way down the passage and they moved in the opposite direction. Stephan shone his torch on the floor and noticed a scrape mark to one side of the passage. It travelled for about a metre and then stopped on the join between two blocks.

“This is it,” he said, “this is where he slid down into the hole.” The men came down and shone their torches on the floor.

“People slide down on their asses all the time,” said one man, just as Stephan looked up to see several torchlights sporadically illuminating the tunnel sides by the entrance.

“Stephan!” Jaff shouted, causing the entire pyramid to resonate.

“Down here. I’ve found something.”

It was starting to get a bit crowded in the limited space that the passage afforded. The two men had to squeeze past Stephan so that Jaff could get down to him. Stephan pointed at the mark in the dust and told them not to walk on it. Jaff approached Stephan with a sterner than usual look on his face and held out his hand. Although Stephan was familiar with the bone-crushing effect of Jaff’s handshake he accepted the friendly gesture. Every time Jaff greeted him in this way, Stephan would try and exert a little more pressure on Jaff’s hand, in a vain attempt to match the virility of his salutation, but he could never get anywhere near the vice-like grip that now imprisoned *his* right hand

“That’s where he slid down,” he winced, “this entire block must have upended and then closed again,”

“You do realise how completely crazy this sounds don’t you Stephan?” bellowed Jaff extending an arm and resting it on Stephan’s shoulder.

“I know what I saw. He disappeared into the floor,” replied Stephan, staring intently into Jaff’s dark, shark-like eyes.

Jaff paused for a few seconds, then said, “I’ve got some ultrasonic gear up top, not that we haven’t been over this whole area a thousand times before.”

With that he instructed two of his men to fetch the machine from the truck. They used ultrasonic to detect hidden chambers behind the stones. Some Egyptologists, convinced that the pyramids were hiding great treasures and secrets, wanted to dismantle the structures from the top down, but they had more chance of convincing Jaff to wear a *mankini*.

*

“Now Oli,” the voice said, “you must have a million questions you want to ask me. We can either sit here for a few days while I explain everything to you or I can simply transfer the relevant data to your brain. It’s up to you.”

“Can you... Can I... is it... you know, safe? Have you... you know, done it before?”

Oli was burbling quite badly now. He was generally game for anything, but this situation had gone seriously off-road.

“It’s perfectly safe Oli,” reassured the voice without a single indication of; *actually I’ve never tried it before*. “You won’t feel a thing.”

Oli thought about it for a few seconds and then agreed. With that, a small flap slid open on the control panel, and it was replaced from beneath with a tray containing a pair of snazzy-looking headphones. They were made of shiny silver metal with soft white pads on either end.

“I’ll need you to put these on Oli,” the voice said as the tray extended out from the panel towards Oli’s hand. He reached out and picked them up. They were impossibly light. They felt as though they would float away from his hand if he were to relax his grip for a second. He slipped them over his long matted hair and placed the white pads in his ears. *Ok*, he thought, *so they probably were not designed with human ears in mind*.

“Perfect fit,” Oli said with his hands outstretched, open palmed, as if admiring a new shirt.

“Almost perfect Oli,” said the voice. “The pads locate on your temples just in front of your ears.”

“Oh.”

Oli made the necessary adjustments and sat back in the chair. As he did so, he felt the back of the chair moving. In an instant it had formed an exact match to the shape of his back. *Imagine if the beds are like this as well*, he thought.

“They are Oli,” the ship offered by way of a response to the question that he’d never asked.

“Hold on,” exclaimed Oli, sounding slightly perturbed, “can you hear what I’m thinking!?”

Oli was a bit disgruntled by this. After all, it was his head and whatever went on in there was his business. Quite often, even *he* didn’t fully understand what was going on in there.

“I can get a rough outline of your thoughts from the room sensors, but when you wear the Neural Feed Set, I hear everything. I’m sorry if that makes you feel uncomfortable Oli, but it’s only for a short time. I’ll try not to listen.”

“Now, are you sure this isn’t gonna hurt, ‘cause I’m not very good with things that... Woaw!”

Suddenly Oli knew everything, as though the memories had been in his head for a lifetime. He leant forward in the chair and slid the NFS headset out through the tangle of hair and placed it back on the control panel. He flopped back into the chair and sighed.

“Woaw,” he repeated.

*

The date was 50,000 BC, Earth time, and the Annenian mineral exploration ship *Finders Keepers* had been dispatched to an L-class planet in the system of Bartiss. The planet had already been explored and had been used on several occasions for Global Parties. The Annenians were particularly fond of packing a few thousand people off to a remote planet for a few weeks of self-indulgence, music, dancing and all the trimmings of a full-on, off-world party. The whereabouts of the parties were always kept secret until the last minute, not because of any law breaking or restrictive regime, but just because it was more fun that way. The Annenians knew all about fun. They were the most advanced life form in the explored sector of the galaxy, had no fears of invasion, hunger or illness and lived to have a good time. They’d stopped reproducing when their life expectancy became so long that there was no longer any point in propagation.

The giant transport ships that carried the partygoers to their destination would be in themselves venues for parties. Flying at many times the speed of light, they would sometimes travel for weeks to a planet with a suitable atmosphere, devoid of intelligent life, and party till they were bored. It was after one such party that had lasted for three weeks that the clean-up drone ship *Skoupa* was disposing

of all the rubbish into the planet's mantle. Whilst performing this fully automated task, it discovered a large deposit of Glurk, one of the most important elements in the construction of the Graviton Generators that provided the main propulsion for their ships. *Finders Keepers* was immediately sent to assess the level of the deposit. It was ascertained to be considerable, and so a mining expedition was planned.

Annenians were not the biggest fans of manual labour; there was no need for it. They had everything they required. If there was building work to be carried out or holes to be dug, they had drones that were more than happy to oblige. They harboured no ambitions to conquer worlds, and they had reached a point in space travel that satisfied all their imaginable needs. So when it came to the extremely manual task of mining, they usually employed the assistance of locals. In this case, the most intelligent creatures on the planet were sea dwellers; slightly less than useless for mining Glurk. So they had to employ the primitive humanoid species that were still hunting with stone tools and clumping each other over the head with lumps of wood. They did however, require the workers to be able to take instruction and work out the simplest of conundrums for themselves, so they genetically enhanced the creatures.

The scientist in charge of the operation, Dr Sha Haman, was so pleased with her work that she requested that the new creature be given a Class 2 status. This would mean that the Annenians would become responsible for the species' growth and protection for its natural life, rather like a godparent. There had only ever been one other species with a Class 2 status and they had recently been wiped out when their star went Nova on them. So the Annenians had been searching for a new baby to adopt. The request was accepted, and the new species was named after Dr Haman.

It took a hundred and fifty of the planets years to mine the Glurk, during which time the Hamans were cared for, fed, and taught a few basic skills. The Hamans worked hard and were rewarded for their work. They learnt how to build weapons from bone, how to construct basic dwellings, and they were given a very simplistic appreciation of art. So when the last cup full of Glurk was lifted from the planet's core, the Annenians packed away all traces of their visit and left, safe in the knowledge that they'd given the creatures an excellent boost towards their new lives.

They did pay regular visits to the planet to check up on the kids over the next 38,000 years, when they weren't too busy having fun. They took great pleasure in making sure that the Hamans were developing well and not coming to any harm. The visiting Annenians would disguise themselves as Hamans and travel among the wandering tribes dropping hints about necessary skills, such as hunting, manufacturing of tools and clothes and of course, how to party. It never ceased to amaze the Annenians how much fun they could have with a piece of goatskin stretched over a hollowed-out log. They were very excited about the development of this new species. The Annenians had witnessed a strong desire to explore and expand in the Hamans' psyche and over the millennia they watched them leave the confines of the large equatorial continent on which they had been found, to most habitable parts of the planet. The Hamans possessed a lust for discovery that had long since departed the Annenian psyche. They sent groups of scientists to record the Hamans' attempts at crossing the continents. Occasionally they would lend a helping hand without revealing themselves or any of their technology. They instructed tribes in the construction of vessels that could carry them across the sea or guide them away from an impassable desert.

It was on one of these visits that a young scientist called Shtelar found a wounded parrot flapping around in circles on the ground, quite obviously distressed. It was a beautiful, green female Eclectus Parrot. She had a broken wing and was surely going to die. Shtelar had never seen anything as beautiful as this bird and immediately fell in love with it, and although Annenian law expressly forbade it, she decided to take it back to Annenia with her. She fixed its wing, placed it in suspended animation and hid it in her portable research lab. Shtelar managed to smuggle the parrot through the spaceport on Annenia with ease.

She lived in a little house on the edge of Lake Veanon, and the parrot quickly adapted to its new surroundings, perching on the veanonberry tree every night, eating the berries and relieving itself into the water below. During the investigations that were to follow, the Annenians surmised that it had taken two years for the parrot droppings to contaminate the entire lake. Lake Veanon was a feeder lake to several other lakes, which also became contaminated. All of the lakes ran into the vast ocean, which surrounded the single continent of Annia. All of the water on all of the space craft was taken

from Annenia and reduced at the molecular level for transportation because Annenians refused to drink water from any other planet, so all the ships and hence all the colonies on faraway planets received the contaminated water. During the course of five years, every Annenian alive was unknowingly contaminated with the strange virus.

The first manifestation of the disease presented itself as forgetfulness. Thousands of Annenians were forgetting simple things such as where they'd parked, or how to get home. The enquiry revealed the alien bacterium, which had mutated with an Annenian one found only in the fruit of the veanonberry tree. They traced it back to the lake and eventually the parrot. Shtelar was told that she had been very bad and if they had any form of punishment on Annenia, she would surely have received it, and then they all forgot why they were there.

“That’s a pretty bird,” stated one of the investigators, “what’s it called?”

“Well, it keeps saying ‘Pardy Polly,’ so I’ve called it Pardy,” replied Shtelar.

By this time, some Annenians had completely lost their minds and required constant care. But because they had eradicated disease, there were more Annenians that needed help than there were drones to administer it. The disease progressed at different rates for different Annenians, and a few managed to stay unaffected for many years. But they couldn’t stay on Annenia; things were slowly falling apart as everyone forgot how to perform more important tasks. They were forgetting how to walk and just lying in the street until someone who had forgotten how to drive ran them over. An Annenian cruiser pilot forgot that stars are hot and flew his ship, carrying two thousand Annenians into one, because it looked pretty.

Two hundred Annenians came to Earth in the fastest ship they could find, Cranus, to build a legacy by which they would be remembered and which would help their children grow. They built the pyramids twelve thousand years ago, to hide the little ship in which Oli was now sitting, learning their story. They also placed various clues as to the position of the treasure around the planet. One example of these clues being the Nazca lines in the Nazca Desert in Peru. These images can only be seen from the sky and they gave clear directions in the Annenian language to the pyramids and the treasure that lay beneath them. They understood from the study of other life forms that the advent of flight usually

marked a turning point in the growth of a civilisation. This was the juncture where the beings would abandon their belief systems and begin the search for the true answers that only science and space travel could provide. The actual layout of the pyramids themselves and the orientation of the twelve sides, pointed quite obviously to Annenia's star. They had carefully calculated the projected intellect of the species in relation to its technological ability to fly, but in the end, it was just a guess.

The plan that had been formulated, involved the ship waiting in its sealed tomb until such time as the Hamans had proved themselves worthy of the gift of knowledge that it represented. Then the ship would find a suitable Haman and offer the Haman race all the knowledge stored within it, enabling them to evolve to the next level.

Fortunately the Annenians finished the building before they forgot what they were doing. They became so forgetful that the Hamans, who they so lovingly called their children, refused to have anything to do with them, and they were cast out into the wilderness where they eventually forgot how to breathe.

Through the ages, the ship had been silently waiting below the Giza Plateau for the moment when the Hamans, who had somehow managed to change their name to Humans, were ready to receive the information that it possessed. For the last century, it had been monitoring the radio waves. It had witnessed the Humans' knowledge of science grow at an extraordinary rate in the last fifty years and had started its search for a Human friend at about the time of the first moon landing, all the time thinking that any day now the Humans would decipher the clues and discover its hiding place.

The ship had placed a string of miniature satellites in orbit around the planet. With these satellites it had been able to spy on the Humans, and when they became technologically advanced it could plug in to every form of communication available. The satellites were only the size of a grain of sand and they utilised the Annenian nulspace frequency, so they would never be detected. During the years of advancement, it had watched every television show ever broadcast, listened to every radio station every minute of the day, heard every telephone conversation and read every e-mail, text and Tweet. Resembling one of the many gods that had graced the Human imagination throughout the millennia, it knew the name, address and personal habits of every person that had ever touched a piece of

electronic equipment or filled in a form. It had seven billion potential applicants for the job of Human representative and for some reason best known to the ship, it had chosen Oli.

“Haven’t you been a bit bored, buried here for twelve thousand years?” Oli asked, still looking around as he talked, searching for someone to address.

The ship explained to him that twelve thousand Earth years was only three thousand two hundred and forty Annenian years, so it wasn’t really that long. The ship had spent the time philosophising, improving the ship’s gravity drive and playing truth or dare with itself.

“So what now?” asked Oli. “Do you have a plan?”

The ship explained that its original plan was to fly into orbit, announce its arrival to the whole of humanity and send Oli to meet with the world leaders to relay the story of the Annenians.

“I’m afraid you’ve seriously misjudged the ability of your little children,” said Oli, leaning back in his seat. “Maybe a few will welcome you with open arms, but the ones with their fingers on all the launch buttons will react in a very different manner.”

“I think we need a new plan.”

Oli sat back in the chair, his fingers clasped together and his thumbs resting on his bottom lip.

“Oh by the way, this is the coolest thing that’s ever happened to me. Ta much.”

“Well that was the *original* plan Oli,” the ship continued. “I was instructed to wait until the Human race had reached a level of understanding that would enable them to appreciate and not abuse the knowledge. I fear that as a whole, you have some way to go to reach that point. I just wanted to see your reaction to the plan. As it happens, I completely concur with your appraisal of the situation.”

“Anyway,” it continued, as Oli pondered the meaning of its last sentence, “there has been a slight development Oli, which requires immediate action.”

Oli lent forward in the chair, gesturing with one hand as if to say, come on then, give it to me.

“A large asteroid is on a collision course with the planet. We must go to Annenia and collect the necessary equipment with which to deflect it.”

“Garumph!” Oli said, slumping back in the chair. He’d been a big fan of comic books as a child, and had developed the unusual habit of voicing the expressive noises that his favourite characters

would use. “Well this is all way over my head but I’m up for it if you are. When do we leave?” This whole situation was really testing his ability to go with the flow to the max.

*

The search above came up with nothing. The sensors revealed solid rock beneath the floor of the passageway, as they had done many times before. Oli had been transported down through the rock in a matter transform bubble, transforming the rock into empty space and back into rock as it passed through. The Annenians had used the same technology to build the pyramids. The machines transformed blocks of limestone into air, placed over a grid on the floor and as each layer of nothing was complete they would transform it back into limestone. It was the hardest that any Annenian had worked for Millennia. It took ninety eight of them four days, working flat out to build the three pyramids. The other two couldn’t work because they had begun randomly forgetting how to control their bodily functions and were no longer welcome inside the cabins of the machinery.

Jaff apologised to Stephan and with a parting gesture of open hands meaning *what the hell can I say*, he left the pyramid. Stephan reluctantly went back to his apartment to try and get some sleep. He would return in the morning; to do what? He wasn’t yet sure.

*

“Are you feeling tired Oli?” the ship asked, sounding concerned. “If you need sleep, I can stimulate your brain with a few hours of virtual sleep. It will only take a few seconds.”

“No, I’m fine thanks. I’m too excited to be tired, but does that mean that I never have to sleep?”

“I’ve never tried it on a Human, but theoretically you should be able to remain active for about one week before you need a genuine night's sleep. Your brain can be easily deceived, but the body soon protests if you continue down that road.”

Oli thought about the potential for clubbing and festivals. Staying up for a whole week, partying through day and night and never getting tired. *Mmm*, he thought. He was just slipping into Oli World when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Did you just touch me?” he asked, looking around in both directions.

“Virtually,” the ship stated, very matter-of-factly. “I don’t have any physical form so I cannot actually touch anything, but I can stimulate your nerve endings with a very high frequency signal, so that you believe that I touched you.”

“Telepathy?” quizzed Oli.

“Yes Oli, a very basic form, but telepathy all the same. The Annenians were highly telepathic, and designed their ships with an artificial form of telepathy so that they could be controlled by thought. Humans have some way to go before your brains can even begin to explore this possibility.”

The dis passed metres above Oli’s head as he thought about a ship controlled by thought. This didn’t appeal one little bit. He would much rather see a wheel, with knobs and buttons to press. *Oh well*, he thought, *can’t have everything I suppose*.

“Are we in kind of a rush, or can I have a look around the rest of the ship, Ship?”

Oli chuckled. He had wanted to give the voice a real name but the *ship*, *Ship* thing really appealed to his sense of humour, so he decided to leave it until he was bored with the joke, which in all reality could take weeks.

“The journey to Annenia will take five days, then we must locate and collect the equipment. That’s assuming that it has survived the inevitable demise of Annenia during the subsequent twelve thousand years. Then five days to return to this solar system, leaving us with three days to perform a task that should only take about ninety minutes. So yes Oli, we have time to spare.” And with that Oli heard a short *psst* noise from behind him. He swivelled round on the chair to see that a door at the far side of the room had opened.

“As I’m sure you’ve already appreciated Oli, this is the control room.”

Oli would have liked to see a few more controls, but he had suspected that it might be the bridge. He pushed himself off the chair with a little jump, landed both feet on the floor and walked towards the door. As he reached it he could see a long corridor, the same height as the room and about the same length as a bus. There were seven doors, three on either side and one at the end. There were no lights on the ceiling or on the walls, but the corridor was well illuminated. The light seemed to emit from within the fabric of the walls.

The ship sensed Oli's impending question.

"The walls are constructed from a light generating metal alloy, Oli." Oli could have sworn that he heard a snigger.

"The material that was used in the internal construction of all ships was an alloy of Annenian Bennian and the light-generating ore Gargite, found only on Garg. It's a magnificent planet Oli. It shines like a star but is actually totally frozen over." The ship continued to explain that Earth astronomers have been misidentifying Garg as a star since astronomy began. He would point it out to Oli when they were in orbit.

"Cool!" said Oli. The thought of being in orbit above the earth actually looking down at the entire planet was a childhood fantasy about to come true. Oli walked down the corridor running his hand down the wall as he went. It was as smooth as glass and cool to the touch. He was amazed to see ripples and patterns of light moving away from his fingertips as they brushed the surface. He stopped for a while and started making shapes with his fingers. Interlocking patterns emerged from his fingertips and disappeared into the edges of the wall. If he jabbed the material with his finger, circular ripples spread from the point of impact like waves in a pond.

The ship waited for a few minutes and then cleared its non-existent throat.

"Oh sorry," said Oli, "miles away."

As he reached the first two doors, the one on the left shot open with a "psst."

"That's a bit urgent, isn't it?" he said as he reeled back. "Does it shut that quickly?"

"Yes Oli, but it won't harm you. It has sensors to detect any object in its path. To construct a door that slammed into anyone who walked through, would be sheer folly Oli." The ship reassured him that even if it contacted a falling leaf it would not close. Oli still knew that he would be jumping every time a door opened. He asked the ship to make it more of a *psst*, rather than a *psst!*

"I'll see what I can do Oli."

Oli walked into the room. It was the same size as the control room and the walls glowed. There was a bed that looked like a flat version of the chair on the right hand wall, and a strange looking round metal tray in the far-left corner. The tray was about one metre wide and curved like a very shallow

wok. Suspended from the ceiling above it by a short golden rod, was a silver sphere the size of a cricket ball.

“This will be your room, Oli, and that is a cleansing unit.”

“A shower?” balked Oli.

He imagined all the water running across the floor due to the lack of curtain. Then he remembered where he was and awaited the ship’s explanation.

“It’s called a matrem. It isolates all foreign material on your body and vaporises it. Annenians didn’t perspire, so I’ve upgraded it to include liquid and dried perspiration.”

“Hmm.” Oli frowned, totally unconvinced by the whole idea.

“Can you smell things?” Oli asked, thinking that he might string it out for as long as he could without having to vapourise his body.

“I sense odours in the form of airborne bacterium and particles of bodily fluid, but have no opinion as to whether they are good or bad.”

The ship understood Oli’s question and didn’t want to push anything on him. After all he was handling all of this considerably better than it had anticipated. Oli said nothing; he just gave a nod and turned back into the corridor to face the door opposite. He jumped a little as the door opened, then nearly departed his skin when the one behind him closed. *This is gonna take a while*, he thought. The open door revealed an identical room with a bed and matrem.

“I was usually crewed by two Annenians,” the ship offered by way of an explanation.

“Where did the other ninety-eight sleep?” Oli asked, half expecting the ship to say they were frozen in the cargo hold.

“The main ship, Cranus, is hidden on your moon disguised as a mountain Oli. They transferred me from Cranus to this ship to make it easier to hide me on Earth. Cranus is a little too bulky to have concealed it on Earth.”

“When do I get to see Cranus then?” asked Oli, excited about the prospect of being on a huge star ship. He tried to imagine what the bridge of the big ship would be like.

“We have no need of Cranus at this present time Oli,” the ship explained, “but one day when the Human race is ready, it will be resurrected.”

Oli looked through the doorway without actually entering, to confirm that it was identical to his room. He nodded and continued down the corridor. As he approached the next doors, he suspiciously scrutinised the door on the left, telling himself, *it's gonna go “psst” any second now. Ready... ready...* He jumped as the door on the right went “psst.” Oli looked shocked. Had the ship just played a practical joke on him? Did it have a sense of humour? Surely not.

“This is the computer room Oli.” Not a hint of a smirk.

If that was deliberate, Oli thought, it's good.

He walked to the doorway and looked in to see a similar sized room to the others. The two sidewalls and the back wall were covered with white cabinets, a meter high, two metres long and half a metre away from the floor. Each cabinet had a curved control panel sloping away from the base. The control panels were covered with symbols and groups of buttons. *This is more like it,* thought Oli.

“You never need to come in here Oli. I am totally maintenance free,” the ship said, immediately bursting the image that Oli had conjured in his mind, involving him sitting at one of the control panels, pressing all the buttons as he controlled the ship.

“What if something goes wrong?” Oli asked.

“I can repair any damage that the ship may sustain. Also, there are three million nano drones working all over the ship, and if any problem requires physical work, they can combine to make larger drones.”

Oli was starting to feel a bit left out. Maybe there would be something for him to do in the next room. After all, he still wasn't sure why the ship had brought him along. He walked back to the corridor, looking with one eye over his shoulder at the computer room door. ‘*Psst*’ it shut, he turned. ‘*Psst*’ the other one opened. He walked to the entrance and looked in. Empty! It was the same size, but as far as Oli could tell, contained nothing.

“This is the games room Oli.” The ship's explanation was met with silence. Oli just stood there and looked around at the empty space.

“Squash?”

“The Annenians appreciated recreation Oli. I possess two thousand of their favourite games stored for use on long journeys. Most of the games require telepathy but I can give you a demonstration if you would like.”

“I would like,” said Oli, already entering the room, “very much.”

He walked to the middle of the room, all the time wondering what sort of game could be played in an empty room. The door closed behind him.

“This is a game called Jabnahie. The object of the game is to journey through a three-dimensional cubist universe by synchronising the colours of the cubes. Try to imagine playing your human game called Rubix cube, from inside the cube, using only your mind to synchronize the colours. As each cube is correctly positioned, you advance to the next cube. There are too many variations to explain to you so I will play the game while you watch.”

At that moment, a door opened in the wall to the right of him and a chair, similar to the one in the control room, but more reclined, slid along the floor, coming to rest behind him. He sat in the chair with his palms resting on the arms. The chair adjusted itself to match the contours of Oli’s body and rather more alarmingly, two solid braces arrived from the back of the chair, over his shoulders and down to his waist, completely pinning him into the seat. As this was happening the walls stopped glowing and Oli found himself looking down a tunnel of cubes, diminishing in size into the distance. They began to flash all different colours and rotate forwards, backwards and sideways. Oli wasn’t watching a computer screen or playing a game on a two-dimensional surface, he was actually inside the cube and the entire stage of the game was laid out in three dimensions around him. As the cube that he occupied morphed into a uniform colour, the next cube would shoot forward and the same thing happened again. Then one cube started flashing red and the tunnel turned through ninety degrees, both vertically and horizontally, causing Oli’s neck to ache. He felt his weight pushing forward into the chest restraints. His brain actually instructed him to hold on tight as he went into free fall. His head went through the side of the cube and into a cylindrical tunnel which started flying towards him at an incredible speed. It was like flying down a water shoot with all kinds of lights

flashing either side of him. The tunnel snaked its way for about thirty seconds, throwing him the few millimetres that the restraints would allow and then it exploded into a vast open space. He placed his arms by his side to reassure himself that he was still sitting in a chair, as every other sense in his body was informing him that he was falling through space. Then from all directions, came lines of colour spiralling towards him and in an instant they closed in to form another tunnel of cubes.

The game stopped, the lights came on and Oli was sitting in the middle of the room again.

“Do you get the idea Oli? Oli...Oli...are you alright, Oli?”

“Woaw!” was all that Oli could manage to say. He had seen some great light shows, and computer generated graphics, but this?

“I’m sorry Oli. I thought it would be manageable for your senses on the slow setting, but your brain isn’t used to such strong visual and gravitational effects.”

“Do it again!” Oli spat the words out.

“Maybe later, Oli. We really should be moving on now.”

The restraints disappeared into the back of the chair, which righted itself slightly, allowing Oli to push himself onto his slightly wobbly legs. They left the games room and as Oli looked towards the end of the corridor he was facing the final door. But there were two more doors on the side walls before they reached that one.

“They are just storage and cargo rooms Oli. They are empty now.”

“Okay,” said Oli. “I’m guessing that the end room is something to do with the engines. Am I right?”

“You are indeed Oli. Congratulations on your use of insight.”

Oli turned to face the voice and gave a questioning look. Was it his imagination or had the computer been watching a little too much *Star Wars*. He found himself smiling and was definitely beginning to like his new bodiless friend. But he wouldn’t say anything yet, not until he was sure. The door opened and he walked into a small room with a low ceiling, which tapered towards the back of the room. In the middle of the room was a black pedestal, about a metre high and on it sat a dark,

crystalline globe, which glowed very slightly and audibly pulsed every second or so. There were no controls that Oli could see and he found himself wondering if this thing could ever get off the ground.

“The globe is a Graviton Particle Generator, Oli. It gives the ship all the power it needs and can create a gravity field strong enough to alter the course of your sun. When it is operating, it is sealed in an invisible field of energy that cannot be broken by any force in the known universe. All the energy can then be channelled to a single point in front of the ship, fracturing space/time and allowing the ship to pass through a strange region of the universe that the Annenians named nulspace.”

The ship explained that the gravity drive was incredibly complicated but there would be plenty of time to learn all about it on the journey to Annenia and back.

“I will give you all the information that you require with the Neural Feed Set, but I cannot transfer it in a single bulk, because you would probably burst.”

“Why aren’t there any controls in here?” Oli asked in a voice that conveyed disappointment rather than curiosity.

“All of the controls are within the brain of the ship. I manage everything. The Annenians were fond of simplicity, and their technology was such that they rarely required manual interaction. If they wanted a change to be made to the course or speed they would just think it and it would happen.”

Oli was standing in the doorway to the engine room, with an expression that betrayed total overload. The ship picked up on this, without utilising telepathy.

“Well Oli, that’s the ship. Now I really do think that we had better get moving.”

CHAPTER 3

ANNENIA

There was a second of green light emitted from the Neural Feed Set. It wasn't actually visible in the room, only inside Oli's head and he immediately felt as though he had been asleep for eight hours. He stretched, farted, scratched the inside of his thigh and tossed the NFS back onto the control desk.

"Ahem, Oli, that's actually quite a sensitive piece of equipment," the ship stated ruefully.

"Oops," offered Oli, his teeth clenched apologetically.

"Right then," he said with one hand still manipulating his inner thigh, "let's get to work."

"Oli, it will take us five days and two hours from here, not counting the time that we require to extricate ourselves from this rock. Do you feel up to space travel?"

"Oh, yes, I do believe I'm totally up for space travel," said Oli, trying desperately to prevent himself from leaping into the air and shouting *Yeaha!*

"How do you plan to get us out of here? I hope you're not going to destroy the pyramid. That really would not be a good opening in your quest to win them over."

"By the same method that I used to transport you through the solid rock. It's called a matter transform bubble. Put on the NFS and I'll explain it to you."

Flash! "Cool" said Oli. "These Annenians really were quite smart, weren't they?"

The ship suggested that they leave immediately, under cover of night, to avoid drawing too much attention. All of a sudden, all the lights on the control panel began to flash and there was a deep, almost imperceptible throbbing sound from the rear of the ship. The screen above the control panel began to change colour and Oli could see a domed rocky surface curving around the front of the ship. It was obvious that they were in a cave, the walls of which were close to the outside of the ship. The surface of the cave was very smooth and followed the shape of the hull. He felt around for the arm of the seat, not taking his eyes off the screen, and slid sideways into it.

"I thought you might like to watch as we leave Oli," said the ship.

“You’re totally right; I would,” said Oli, grasping the arms of the chair and leaning slightly towards the panel. “How long will it take us to clear the rock and fly off?”

“No more than two minutes,” answered the ship.

Oli watched as the face of the cave began to shimmer, like looking through the heat haze of a distant city.

“Are we moving yet?”

“Yes Oli, we are travelling through the rock at twenty five kilometres per hour. You will not feel any movement because the ship is encased in a stationary gravity field that counteracts any forces exerted from outside.”

The light show continued for a couple of minutes and Oli was sat glued to the screen. Then the colours began to dissolve and the shimmering slowed as the rock cave slowly reappeared.

“We will have to hold here for a while,” said the ship. “I’ve detected two men walking on the surface. We’ll wait for them to pass.”

“Stephan!” exclaimed Oli, smacking the palm of his right hand against his brow.

“In all the excitement I forgot all about Stephan. He was in the tunnel with me when you brought me down to the ship. He’s gonna be flipping. Is there any way that we can call him and let him know that I’m okay?”

“What’s his name?” asked the ship.

“Stephan Johansson,” replied Oli. “What are you going to do, call directory enquiries?”

The ship explained that it had every telephone number in the world on record and could locate anyone by their mobile phone signal.

“I have a Stephan Johansson who is currently 5.3 kilometres from here, in the city of Cairo.”

“That’s him,” said Oli. “Where’s the phone?”

“I’ll put him on the speaker. Just speak normally.”

The sound of a ringing tone filled the room and following just three rings the distressed sounding Stephan answered.

“Stephan. It’s Oli.”

“Where the hell are you? What happened? Are you okay?” blasted Stephan in one long breath.

“I’m fine.”

Oli would have covered the mouthpiece at this point but there wasn’t one, so he turned away from the screen and whispered. “Can I tell him what’s going on?”

“I don’t think that would be wise at this present time,” said the ship. “Make something up.”

Now Oli was in no way a world-class liar. In fact, on the few occasions that he had actually tried to embellish the facts, his friends saw through it in the first sentence that he uttered. His entire face would give away his discomfort at the situation.

“Who are you talking to? Where are you?” shouted Stephan.

“I’m sorry Stephan, but I can’t tell you everything. In fact, I can’t tell you anything. But I’m fine and the most amazing thing has happened. I’m going away for a few days and when I get back I’ll call you and tell you everything. I’m sorry if you were worried. Gotta go, bye.”

With that, the ship cut the line and Stephan was left on the balcony of his apartment looking out over the Giza plateau; confused, but relieved that Oli was alive. He was dying to know what was going on though. He had definitely seen Oli disappear through solid rock, and for all his attempts to reason with that ridiculous image, he could find no doubts whatsoever.

“Thanks,” said Oli. “I don’t know if that helped him at all but at least he knows that I’m okay.”

After a few minutes, the ship announced that the coast was clear and with that, the wall of the cave began to shimmer and change colour again. But only for about five seconds and then the screen became black. Oli immediately thought the ship had turned it off, but then he realised that the blackness was dotted with white lights and he was actually looking up into the most incredible night sky that he’d ever laid eyes upon. The screen immediately changed and was now filled with a magnificent view of the entire planet Earth in all its glory.

The flash of silver that Stephan saw from his balcony came from the side of the pyramid and disappeared vertically into the night sky. He could have put it down to a trick of the limited light, but he added up everything that had occurred during the previous few hours and arrived at a completely preposterous conclusion.

“Oh my God,” he exclaimed, falling back into the chair, still looking up into the starry sky, hoping for another glimpse of whatever it was.

Oli sat forward onto the edge of the seat and gasped at the sight, his jaw just a few inches from the floor.

“I thought you might like to take a look at your planet for the first time Oli,” said the ship.

Oli, like most people on Earth with access to a computer or television had seen pictures of the earth from space, but as any astronaut would confirm, nothing prepares you for the real thing.

“Do you mean to tell me that we moved from Egypt to here in just a couple of seconds?” asked Oli, trying to imagine exactly how far they had travelled in just a few seconds.

“We are stationary in space at 70,000 kilometres from our previous position. It is not recommended to travel faster than light within a solar system; there are all kinds of gravitational effects from the planets, which can cause problems for the integrity of the graviton field.”

“How fast exactly *is* this ship?” asked Oli, sitting back in the chair, mouth agape.

“When travelling faster than light,” explained the ship, “we use the light scale. So the measurement of Light-50, would indicate that we were travelling fifty times faster than light.”

“What’s that in kilometres per hour?” asked Oli, eager to get some idea of the ships potential.

“This ship has never actually been run at full speed, but theoretically we can travel at Light-438, which equates to approximately four hundred and eighty billion kilometres per hour. To put it into terms that you may find easier to grasp; in one hour, the ship would travel from planet Earth to the Sun and back again one thousand six hundred times. I’ve been making some improvements during the last ten thousand years and I believe we may be able to add a further twenty or thirty billion kilometres to that figure.”

“Pretty quick then,” said Oli, his air of nonchalance masking a totally blown mind.

“Let’s go,” he said pointing at the screen.

“That’s a rear view Oli. I think it’s probably best if we go the other way. I’ll drive.”

Oli sat back and watched as the earth became smaller and smaller. The ship had split the screen into two sections, one showing a forward view and the other a rear view. Oli jumped slightly as the

moon appeared, larger than he'd ever seen it before, then that too faded into the distance. Within the space of a few seconds he could see no sign of his home planet. The viewer changed again and he could see the sun expanding to fill the screen. The ship seemed to be flying quite close to the star and Oli expressed a concern that it might get a bit hot. The ship explained that it was equipped with powerful shields that could deflect all known types of radiation. Ten minutes later, there was no sun, just the dark void of space. A further twenty minutes idling along at just below the speed of light and they were clear of the solar system and all its gravitational effects and ready to head for Annenia.

Oli was wandering whether he would see the stars blur and speed past the screen, or if his body would stretch out in front of him and then suddenly spring back into shape, but when the ship finally accelerated past light speed and entered nulspace there was no change in the viewer.

"I've been lied to," said Oli.

The ship explained that the distances between stars are so vast that even at this speed he would not be able to tell that they were moving, unless of course they passed very close to a star. In the early years of Annenian space travel, there were some daredevil Annenians who would do this for fun, but they usually ended up barrelling into an orbiting planet or an asteroid field. The ship reassured Oli that it was not capable of producing adrenalin, so such testosterone-fuelled thrill seeking was not in its nature.

"If we've got five days to kill, I'd like you to teach me more about the ship and the Annenians," said Oli.

"There is much information I wish to give you Oli, but I've been monitoring your brain patterns and I do not wish to do any more rapid dumps for a while."

"You might not," said Oli, "but I'm busting. Where do I go?"

"I do not understand Oli. Where do you wish to go?"

Oli explained in the nicest possible way and was promptly directed to his room where a Human-style waste unit had been installed. The ship had learnt many slang terms and understood much Human behaviour from fifty years of watching television, but it was going to learn a lot more in the next five days. Oli had completely forgotten about the door and when it opened, he flinched and

groaned at himself for being so jumpy. On entering the room he went to the far left corner as instructed, a panel opened and out slid a black toilet. The top of it would have made Thomas Crapper proud, but as with the chair, it tapered to a point on the floor.

It won't take long to fill this up, thought Oli.

The ship told him that the interior contained a waste-recycling unit, which would convert any remaining nutrient into a consumable snack. The remaining waste would be vaporised.

“Where’s the paper?” asked Oli, searching for another little door to open.

“You do not require any paper Oli, the unit will detect any waste product which has become lodged and remove it.”

Oli was sure he’d imagined it, but the ship actually sounded slightly disgusted when it said this.

He stood up, the toilet disappeared into the wall and a tray appeared from above the door. It contained a small round biscuit, similar in texture to a Hob-Nob, which happened to be Oli’s favourite snack. Thankfully it resembled a plain Hob-Nob and not a chocolate one. That might have unsettled even Oli’s cast iron stomach. He picked it up, placed it under his nose took tentative, short, sharp breaths.

“Lasagne?” he inquired.

“Yes Oli. The unit will analyse your digestive flavours and try to recreate a similar taste that is pleasing to your palate.”

Oli examined the biscuit intently, before stealing a tiny nibble and chewing it with his front teeth only, not willing to commit his entire mouth to the task. Once he was convinced that there were no remaining hostile flavours, he walked back to the control room, taking more bites on the way, leaving a tell-tail, Hobnob trail of crumbs behind him. He was concerned that he would have to live on the same recycled biscuit for the whole journey, but the ship ensured him that this would only work once. After that, all the nutrients would have been absorbed by his body and the biscuit would be of little use. The ship was equipped with a food maker that could reproduce any type of food using the fifteen million sampled ingredients it had stored within its memory. It converted atoms, drawn into the unit

from surrounding space, into the relevant molecules that could be combined to create anything contained within its memory banks.

Oli sat in the control chair, and the ship told him it would begin his knowledge implant slowly, with a reduced flow of information. It would be like watching speeded up television and remembering everything. So Oli placed the headset on his temples, sat back in the chair and closed his eyes. For the next six hours, he received 2,000 years of Annenian history. From their first attempts at space travel, which were not dissimilar to those of humans, to the first successful attempt at breaking the light barrier.

The Annenians shared a similar volatile past with Humans, with an industrial age leading to wars and competition to reach the three moons that orbited the home world. Then one year, shortly after they'd discovered graviton technology, an asteroid, akin to the one hurtling towards Earth, appeared on a collision course with their planet. The entire Annenian race realised that they would have to work together to halt this threat. So they did; and once the asteroid was diverted into the Annenian star, they never looked back as a race and had enjoyed millennia of peace, harmony and parties to die for.

With the discovery of faster-than-light travel, they were able to colonise many planets within a relatively small section of the galaxy. But Annenia was always the favourite world. They would only stay away for a few hundred years before coming back home to sample the good life. Some Annenian explorers had ventured further out into unexplored space, but even travelling at many times the speed of light, they would need several lifetimes to reach the other end of the galaxy. The idea of reaching other galaxies had been abandoned long ago as quite simply impossible. Oli understood why the Annenians loved their home planet so much. From the few images he had received, it looked stunning.

The ship was very impressed by Oli's ability to sit and absorb information, but didn't want to overload his poor little monkey brain. The flow of information stopped, and Oli opened his eyes. He didn't say anything, just sat there silently, looking out at the brilliant stars, with eyes like a tarsier, startled by its own flatulence.

“Are you alright Oli?” asked the ship, “any dizziness, or trouble focusing?”

“No I’m fine,” he uttered, with a very slight shake of his head, without taking his eyes off the screen.

“What a story, and I remember everything like I lived it myself. I must admit though, I do feel a bit tired. I think I might go and get my head down for a while, you know real sleep, if that’s alright with you.”

“Of course it is Oli. It’s only natural for you to feel weary after such a long period of absorption.”

Oli slept soundly for nine hours, and when he awoke, it was dark and he wasn’t sure if the whole weird thing had been a dream. Then the walls slowly began to glow again, taking about a minute to regain their full brightness. *Damned civilised, these Annenians*, Oli thought, his mind flooded with relief that it hadn’t been a dream. No alarm or blinding morning light. They really knew how to start a day.

“Good morning Oli,” said the ship. “Can I suggest that you take a matrem? My sensors are picking up many foreign bodies and bacteria on your person.” *That was the nicest way that anyone has ever told me that I stink*, thought Oli. He walked to the matrem and stood under the silver ball. He felt a slight tingling feeling all over for about a second.

“That’s it Oli, it has completed its cleansing sequence,” said the ship. “The micro-drones have prepared your clothing while you were sleeping.”

He found his clothes on a small shelf that had irised opened in the wall next to his bed. As he put his t-shirt on, he realised that it smelt strange; sort of fresh; and it was soft and glided over his body like silk. There were no creases in any of his clothes and the beloved holes in his socks had miraculously disappeared. Oli finished dressing and walked to the control room, marvelling at the way that his clothes moved in sync with his body.

“Would you like something to eat Oli? The food unit is on the left hand wall.”

A table and stool slid out from the wall and at the end of the table, a panel shushed upwards to reveal a space about the size of an oven recessed into the wall. The inside was grey with a black base, raised slightly to form a platform in the middle and there was a faint light emanating from within the unit.

“Tell the unit what you require Oli. I cannot promise that it will be exactly as your taste buds remember, but it should represent a close approximation. I have been experimenting over the years with Earth recipes and would appreciate your feedback.”

Oli had a croissant with strawberry jam, a glass of orange juice, a cup of coffee and a bowl of muesli. He made a mental note to never drink the ship’s coffee again, but everything else was very palatable. The croissant was definitely not a croissant, but it filled a hole. Whilst he was eating, he could sense the ship waiting for a reaction, rather like his mother would when she was experimenting with a new recipe. So after every mouthful, he would make an ‘mmm’ sound and chew the food with a big smile on his face.

“Delicious,” he stated, probably a few more times than was actually necessary.

He spent the next four days absorbing Annenian history. He only slept twice, but enjoyed virtual sleep several times. He had watched the Annenians exploring space and meeting strange forms of life on various planets throughout the parts of the galaxy that they had explored. Even at the speeds that they were capable of, they had still only covered about five percent of the galaxy. They had encountered only five intelligent life forms, of which the most unpleasant were the Throgloids. They were a barbaric, aggressive life form, intent on destruction and conquering. Fortunately they were far too dumb to ever accomplish space travel and it was predicted that they would wipe themselves out within a few thousand years. As a precaution though, The Annenians did keep a watchful eye on them and if they had ever come close to leaving the confines of their planet, they would have been dealt with appropriately.

“What does ‘appropriately’ mean?” asked Oli, “How would they have dealt with the Throgloids?”

“Just, appropriately,” stated the ship and Oli left it there.

It’s lucky the Annenians weren’t around to see their Humans’ progress, thought Oli, or they might have had to deal with us appropriately too. The ship assured Oli that any of the minor disagreements that Humans had with each other, were mere playground scuffles in comparison with the exploits of the Throgloids.

Another race of beings was named Shmeek. They lived on a small planet, about the same size as Earth, but with much less surface water. It was largely a forest world and they lived in the huge trees that grew to a height of two kilometres. They were the dominant race on the planet and lived in fear of nothing. They never fought, and lived only to farm the forest and play Gampti, a rather unusual game involving a dried Gampti fruit and ten million Shmeek. They would gather at various points around the largest continent which circled the planet's equator. The object of the game was to pass the Gampti from group to group until it reached the point of origin. There were many ways of passing it. They spent much of their time inventing machines to hurl the fruit great distances and catch it also. If it was dropped, it had to be taken back to the previous position. The longest ever game lasted three Shmeek years and ended in a draw.

Oli was also given a general navigator's knowledge of the stars, and now, as he stared at the constellations on the screen, he knew the earth names, distances and associated planets of over three thousand systems. The brightest star on the screen was called Tau Ceti by Earth astronomers. It was 12 light years from Earth and was the Annenian home star. Earth scientists had recently discovered that there was a planet orbiting the star in such a position that it was likely to possess an atmosphere and surface water. They hadn't yet worked out that it was the home star of the species that created humanity. *How little they knew*, thought Oli.

He had also acquired a slightly more composite knowledge of the ship, the gravity drive and how it worked. He was a long way from fully understanding the science behind the generator, but he understood that it created a gravity field similar in strength to a black hole. The ship had explained that gravity is actually the weakest force in the universe, but when you have a lot of it concentrated in a small space it becomes incredibly powerful. The Annenians had theoretically built a Graviton Generator that if ever turned on, would create a centre of gravity as powerful as a point of matter that existed before the big bang. Some scientist had wanted to take it to a corner of space with no life and start it up but they were dissuaded from doing so by the thought that it could grow and grow, swallowing up all around until it eventually devoured the entire galaxy. The graviton generator could focus varying levels of anti-gravity at any point around the ship, forcing it to move in any direction

and at any speed. But the main strength in the generator was to focus a point of gravity so powerful, that it opened up a temporary rift in space, allowing the ship to slip through into nulspace and hence travel faster than the speed of light.

“Is that anything like a wormhole,” asked Oli.

“Wormholes are science fiction Oli, but yes, if you could maintain a graviton rift at one point in space and connect it to another equally implausible rift at some other point, then you could, theoretically, create a wormhole. The Annenians experimented for thousands of years, but never ascertained a means by which the rift could be maintained in a stable form.”

Oli had also aquired a basic knowledge of ten other Earth languages and he was regularly beating the ship at backgammon.

“You need a name,” said Oli in Japanese, his head resting in his hands, staring out to space.

“I can’t keep calling you *ship*. I mean, that’s just daft. Isn’t it?”

“I had never really thought about a name,” replied the ship. “I suppose that if you were to address me by my design and year of awareness, you could call me AK 1077/328.”

“I was thinking maybe of something more like...Ah...Robbie, after my mate in London who’s a wizard with computers.”

“Robbie would be acceptable Oli.”

“When do we need to refuel?” asked Oli. “This Glurk stuff that was mined from the earth’s core can’t last forever, can it?”

“Glurk powers the magnetic and gravitational fields of an Earth-sized planet for about five billion years. The small amount that is harnessed within the Graviton Generator will power this ship for a period in excess of one million years. So there’s no need to worry about running out of fuel just yet. When it comes to kilometres per gallon, I’m the boss.”

All these figures were blowing Oli’s mind but he was trying to take it all in nonetheless.

“So if the human race *does* want to start exploring the stars with this technology,” Oli asked, questions filling his head, “where will we find Glurk, since the Annenians mined it all?”

“Firstly, Glurk is self-replenishing, so the supply is inexhaustible. Secondly, the Annenians didn’t mine it all, or the planet would have stopped producing a magnetic field and that would have been less than ideal.”

*

On the fifth day out from Earth, Oli awoke after a good deep sleep where he dreamt about surfing a giant, never-ending wave. He scratched around on the floor, with his right arm that was already hanging off the bed, for the pile of clothes that he’d abandoned the night before. When he found no clothes, he looked over to the shelf next to the bed and there they were, neatly pressed and folded into a pile. His mother had given up trying to keep his room tidy, but he felt somehow that the drones would not surrender so hastily. He performed the morning ablutions followed by the now customary biscuit, and took a matrem. As he left his room, the walls of the corridor magically lit up following his path towards the control room, where he now felt as relaxed as he did in his own flat. He was sure this must be a sign that he was truly destined for the role, whatever that role might be. Or it could just be that this was the most comfortable and serene environment that any Human had ever experienced. On entering the room he saw, in the middle of the screen, a huge star occupying almost half of the area and blocking out all other light.

“Good morning Oli,” said Robbie, with an unusual spring in his voice. “As you can see, we have entered the Annenian system and have slowed to sub-light speed. We will reach Annenia in thirty five minutes.”

“Great, just time for brekkie,” said Oli, already sitting at the food unit.

“I think I’ll try something different today. Give me a typical Annenian breakfast,” he said, speaking into the food unit, “after all, when in Annenia.”

Oli was focusing on the inside of the machine with one eye on the screen, but soon gave up the view of the star when the breakfast arrived. There on the raised platform, was enough food to satiate a small army.

“Did they tend to scoff quite a bit then” he asked, arching his back and blowing out his stomach.

“Yes Oli, they did have more than a passing interest in food.”

There was a large glass bowl containing some sort of mousse, a square container with red fluffy stuff, a glass the size of two pint glasses with a liquid that was blue on the bottom and pink on the top and, hold on a minute, there was a bowl of cornflakes with what appeared to be milk poured over them.

“What are these?” he asked, pointing at the bowl and looking over his shoulder at no particular point in the room.

“The Annenian would translate as flaky corn, so I suppose that you could call them cornflakes Oli. The Annenians were eating them for breakfast whilst your ancestors were clouting each other over the head with bones.”

The whole breakfast was delicious, especially the red fluffy stuff. Oli ate everything except the Cornflakes. He'd never really liked the way that they became soggy if you didn't eat them immediately. They passed the Annenian sun and were then on the final approach to Annenia, so Oli waddled over to the control seat, rubbing his over-extended midriff, with his eyes glued to the screen. Then out of the black, first as a dot and then growing rapidly, a blue and green planet appeared. It filled the screen like a balloon being inflated from an out-of-control compressed air canister. It looked as though they were going to fly straight through it if they didn't slow down immediately. The ship was rushing towards it like a crash test car, being driven flat out at a brick wall. Oli's knuckles turned white as he gripped the arms of the chair pushing himself firmly into the adequately cushioned backrest. In the time that it took to cry “Woaaaaa!” the planet occupied the entire screen. Suddenly, their advance was halted. One quarter of a billion kilometres per hour to dead stop in less than a second.

“Robbie,” gasped Oli, “I don't mean to be picky,” he said, prizing his finger nails from the freshly imprinted indentations in the chair, “but is it really necessary to approach a planet quite so FAST? I mean what if you couldn't stop in time.”

“It really is quite safe Oli. The generally accepted procedure for entering orbit is to approach at close to light speed, otherwise it would take hours to cover the last part of the journey. There was only one recorded instance when the ship's computer miscalculated the gravity drive cut-off point, and it

was all over very quickly, for both the ship and the planet. But that was during the early days of ftl travel, I couldn't possibly make such a dumb mistake.”

“Good! Try to make sure that you don't. There's a pal.” Oli sounded quite serious for once.

“I'll knock off twenty or thirty mil the next time we approach a planet Oli.”

He was beginning to sound more like Oli. The more time he spent transferring data slowly, the more of Oli's language he picked up. Theoretically it was not possible for information from the brain to travel back up the Neural Feed line, but Oli had noticed that Robbie was definitely sounding more human.

Filling the screen now, was the beautiful jewel of Annenia. Oli hated himself for thinking it, but it was considerably more eye-catching than Earth. It comprised one central landmass covering twenty five percent of the globe. There were thousands of smaller islands, dotted throughout the sea. Both the poles were covered with ice just like Earth. Robbie explained that like Earth, Annenia was in the sweet spot orbiting its sun. It was just the right distance to be warmed by the star without being burnt to a crisp. Fifty percent of all stars, he explained, have at least one planet in the sweet spot. Oli couldn't even begin to imagine how many Earth-like planets must exist out there. The landmass stretched around half the equator and encroached into half the northern and southern hemispheres. There were clouds, swirling storms and a dark mass that looked like a huge city on the top left corner of the land.

“Is that where we're going?” asked Oli, pointing at the dark area.

“Yes Oli, that's Ahrna, the capital city. We have to go to the main space port and locate the workshops, where hopefully, the demolition crews would have completely forgotten their responsibilities, long before completion, allowing us to acquire the necessary equipment.”

They began to move again. In a few seconds Oli could only see the land mass and a bit of the ocean at the top left. They quickly entered the atmosphere and were soon engulfed by thick cloud. Then with a flash, the cloud was gone and in front of them occupying the entire screen was the most incredible site Oli, or any other Human for that matter, had ever laid eyes on. After thousands of years of neglect, the city of Ahrna had been swamped by the surrounding forest. Only the tallest buildings in

the city were visible, protruding from the canopy. Ahrna was truly massive, with skyscrapers kissing the underside of the clouds. Everything seemed to be coloured black, silver or red. The most prominent feature occupying the centre of the city was a giant pyramid that must have been three kilometres high and as black as space. The light from the sun shone onto one surface and that seemed to shimmer and sparkle in a similar fashion to the matter transform bubble. Oli knew from his time on the Neural Feed that this was the main source of power for the entire planet; a giant solar reactor. In a way that Oli couldn't even begin to understand, the pyramid reactor harnessed the energy from the sun, amplified it a thousand times by running it through the core of the planet and distributed the electrical power around Annenia. The reactor was built a thousand years before they even discovered Earth and the city spread around it. All the buildings within twenty kilometres of the pyramid were considerably smaller, so they would not interfere with the sunlight, but the further out you travelled the taller they became. This gave an overall bowl shape to the city, dissolving back into the forest around the edge. As they flew closer to the ground, the surrounding forest seemed to merge with the buildings and Oli noticed that the whole city was overgrown. Great boughs of trees emerged from the shattered sides of buildings and forced their way skyward. The spaces between buildings that must have once been streets had been transformed into dense jungle.

They flew into the centre, towards the pyramid, skimming the treetops and weaving between the skyscrapers. Even these monolithic structures had not escaped the grip of the forest. The plants had used the buildings to climb higher and higher in search of valuable sunlight. This gave the impression that the forest was reaching out with inquisitive green fingers, pulling the buildings down to its level.

In the centre of the screen a series of diagrams appeared. There were numbers, Annenian characters, and a grid that was fixed to one spot in the city and as the ship turned, the grid would move to remain fixed on that spot and as the ship banked, the grid tilted in the opposite direction to remain level with the horizon.

“What’s that for Robbie?” Oli asked, leaning forward but unable to decipher any of the symbols.

“It’s a final approach guidance system Oli, generally used for manual landings.”

“So you *can* be flown manually. Superb! When do I get to have a go?”

“Later Oli,” snapped Robbie, with a hint of *please don’t bother me now; I’m trying to land a spaceship* in his voice. He was of course capable of landing the ship, playing five thousand games of chess, and reading *War and Peace* in every Earth language simultaneously but he hadn’t done it for twelve and a half thousand years, so he felt it may be prudent to err on the side of caution.

Oli could now clearly see their destination. It was another pyramid, much smaller than the main one and with the top chopped off to leave a platform. The platform, even from this distance, looked bigger than a football pitch and there was a tower rising another hundred metres above it in the far left corner, similar to the bridge of an aircraft carrier. The ship had now slowed to a speed where Oli could see that the smaller buildings were completely overgrown with vegetation of all kinds and only the tallest buildings were protruding through the forest below. A small red grid appeared inside the first platform that was rolling with the roll of the ship and pulsing around a fixed point on the roof of the flat-topped pyramid. As they approached the spaceport, the ship slowed and Oli heard a clunk from underneath.

“That’s the landing legs Oli,” Robbie anticipated.

All that progress; star travel, cities the size of France and the landing gear on the ships, still goes clunk! Very poor, thought Oli.

The ship hovered over the platform and touched down next to the tower, as delicately as a leaf landing on a pile of feathers. Oli could now see a layer of dust on the surface and creepers that had sprung up from below were entwined on the surface. From this close proximity, the city was definitely showing its age.

“I’m going to send the micro-drones to locate the equipment. If you wish to accompany them, you may,” Robbie announced, already aware of Oli’s answer.

“Oh I want, I definitely want,” said Oli, leaping from the chair and on his way to his room to find his freshly-cleaned shoes. He was going to be the first Human to set foot on another planet other than the moon, and he suddenly remembered the disposable camera in his jacket pocket. Oli was the only person that he knew that still used one of these cameras. Obviously, he owned a phone, he wasn’t living in the dark ages, but he just loved the excitement of collecting the photos from a developer, so

he always carried a disposable camera with him on holiday. He was just trying to work out how he would take a picture of himself when he looked down and saw six lines of dust on the floor, moving, converging, on one single point near the door. They began to build into a pile, larger and larger. Then legs began to form and the beginnings of a body.

“The micro-drones will form a humanoid shape,” said Robbie, sensing Oli’s confusion, “since the building was designed with Annenians in mind.”

Oli watched as a child-sized figure with arms, legs and a head took shape. It had no eyes or mouth, and very strange hands with only two oversized fingers and an equally large thumb. The surface was metallic black, with a hammered effect that gave the impression of scales.

“Will it be able to take a piccy?” asked Oli, holding the camera up towards the panel, shaking it lightly.

“Certainly Oli. Give the camera to the drone and instruct it how to take a picture.”

Oli held the camera out for the drone to receive. It took it in its right hand and looked at it with a blank expression, made even more blank due to the lack of features.

“You point this at me,” shouted Oli, in the manner of an English person giving directions to a foreigner to find the Tower of London. “Then you press this here,” he said slowly and without realising, in an even louder voice.

“Just speak normally Oli,” said Robbie. “When you communicate with the drone, you’re actually talking to me and I have a more than adequate understanding of your language.”

“Oooh,” said Oli, with a wry smile on his face.

The drone turned and walked down the corridor to the cargo hold at the rear of the ship and Oli followed.

“Stay with the drone Oli,” said Robbie. “It knows where to go and I do not want to have to come looking for you.”

Oli turned and saluted, then followed the drone into the cargo hold. As they entered, a door opened in the back wall. Half of it slid upwards and the other half slid down towards the landing pad. Then a walkway came out from the floor and made its way to the dusty ground below. Oli and the drone

descended the gangway and as Oli put his left foot out to step off the ship, he thought, this is the piccy to take. So he told the drone to move a few metres away, turn and take the picture. Oli stood at the top of the ramp with his arms folded, looking very much like the great explorer. The drone performed as requested and photographic history was made. Oli thought, *they're gonna get a shock when I take this one into Snappysnaps to be developed.*

As they walked away from the ship, Oli turned and for the first time, saw the craft that had been his home for the last five days. It was a forty metre long streamlined grey dart, with no protrusions or windows. The front didn't taper to a point, as he'd expected, it ended in a rounded stub. It looked like the front of a cargo plane rather than a fighter jet. The ship was much wider in the middle and it tapered in all directions to the rounded rear, where the base of the craft formed a concave shape. Oli moved to the front of the craft and realised that from that vantage point the profile took on a saucer shape. There were three legs, one at the front and two in the middle, each of which ended in three splayed fingers reaching out two metres in each direction. He stood back and looked at it for a while and was happy in the thought that his ship was a real beauty. He did however wonder if it came in black, because that would look awesome. Before the thought was fully formed in his head, the ship shimmered with two sweeps front to back, and changed colour to the darkest black Oli had ever seen.

Still listening in then, thought Oli

"Sorry," said Robbie.

The dust on the ground was like the finest soft sand on a beach. Oli and the drone disturbed it as they walked, leaving a fine wake behind them. Oli couldn't resist kicking his feet through the dust, causing powdery explosions as he walked, until one of the explosions covered the drone from head to toe. The drone stopped in its tracks and without any movement from its body, the head rotated through one hundred and eighty degrees to face Oli.

"Sorry," said Oli, with his hand masking the clenched teeth.

The drone continued its journey towards the tower at the end of the landing platform, where a door patiently awaited its first use for twelve thousand years. When they reached the door, the drone extended an arm to the entry panel on the side. There was no power, so nothing was going to work.

The drone put one of its fat fingers against the panel and Oli baulked as the end of the finger dissolved into the panel. Within ten seconds, the door uttered a tired groan, creaked and slid open to reveal a lift. The drone was then rejoined by the end of its finger. They got in and the drone sent another finger into the panel to operate the motor. Robbie explained through the drone that the micro-drones were using their own power sources to operate the equipment. The lift began to move slowly, complaining all the way about this rude awakening as it descended into the building. Oli thought that it was a credit to the skill of the Annenians that it moved at all. The journey down into the building ended with a soft jolt and the doors opened onto a huge hall the size of ten football pitches. As far as the eye could see there were dismantled ships and workshops full of parts. When the Annenians had accepted their fate, they planned to leave nothing in working order, just in case some unfriendly life form found it and used the technology to cause trouble. But during the chaos that ensued, everyone forgot what they were doing had left much of the work incomplete.

The drone headed down the central aisle. In the middle of the building they approached a hole in the floor, about one hundred metres across. Oli walked to the edge and tentatively leaned his head over to look down. The shaft went straight through the middle of the building and disappeared into the darkness below. There must have been hundreds of floors. He could just see into the first three levels, and they looked identical to the one on which he stood. They were massive hangars into which the ships descended from the roof. He began to feel a bit dizzy and so stepped back from the edge. After walking a little further, they took a left turn towards a single storey bunker-like building. The drone sent its finger in to open the door. A colossal round door, five metres across, rolled away to the left, disappearing into the wall, and inside there was another shiny round door about three metres in diameter. The drone walked up to the control panel on the wall and inserted a whole hand into the entry panel.

Crikey, thought Oli, *this must be one serious door to need a whole hand to open it*. After about a minute, there was a deep thud and the door began to open outwards. As it swung out towards Oli, he could see that it was a metre thick, and when fully opened, revealed a room containing ten crystal

globes just like the one in the engine room of the ship, each one sitting on a pedestal; lifeless, neither glowing nor throbbing.

“Graviton Generators I take it,” Oli said to the faceless head, and to his surprise, it nodded.

It walked to the first globe and picked it up. A hole opened on the front of the drone, and it slid the globe into the hole, which then closed. They retraced their footsteps back to the elevator and on passing the shaft, Oli had to have one more look at the impressive view from the edge. As he was teetering on the edge with his right arm flailing about behind as a counter balance, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, a flash of colour. He looked round suddenly, nearly throwing himself off balance. He was wobbling on the very edge of the shaft, desperately trying to find something to grab hold of when he felt the drone’s fat little hand around his wrist, pulling him clear.

“Cheers matey,” he said, shaking the drone's other hand.

Then again, he saw a flash of colour out of the corner of the other eye. His head spun to the left, then the right, then upwards, as more flashes of red and blue appeared and disappeared.

“Oli, I would like you to return to the ship now!” Robbie’s voice appeared from the drone sounding quite serious.

“Why, what’s up?” inquired Oli.

“I’m not too sure. Just hurry back.”

Oli and the drone set off towards the lift. Every now and then Oli would catch a flash of colour in the corner of his eye. But each time he spun round to look, there was nothing there. On entering the lift, the drone sent a finger into the control panel, the doors closed, and Oli felt the downward push as they moved off, creaking their way back to the surface. When the door opened, Oli couldn’t believe what he was looking at. The ship was exactly where he had left it but it was covered in tiny white blobs.

I’ve seen this before, he thought.

Then he realised it was like the time that he’d parked his scooter under a tree near his flat in Fulham, unaware that the tree was a favourite perch for thousands of starlings. As he approached the ship, he confirmed that it was definitely bird poo, and what a pong. He walked to the gangway and

was just about to enter the ship, when he caught another flash of red and turned to see a couple of hundred red and green birds flying straight towards him. As they came closer he could see that they were parrots. They started circling overhead and Robbie's voice emerged from the drone asking Oli to get into the ship. But Oli was way too curious to miss this. Five parrots emerged from the company and flew towards him. They landed in the dust, blowing up plumes with their wings and slowly trudged towards him. They were light enough to walk on top of the sandy dust but they did leave a rather unusual pattern in it with their claws. The birds were all coloured red and blue, except for one that was green. They stopped and looked up at Oli. Oli dropped down on his haunches and slowly extended a hand towards them. At first they all flinched in unison and took a step backwards, but then one of them came forward.

“Are you a Haman?” one of the parrots said. The voice was like a parrot's, but not so Punch and Judy; more sophisticated.

Oli pulled his hand back.

“Well, ah, yes, actually I am,” Oli stumbled the words out. “Are you a parrot?”

“Yes, we are parrots and we would like to welcome you to our home.”

The parrot that spoke was obviously in charge and the other four just nodded their approval.

“Well, thank you very much. It's very nice to meet you. My name is Oli.” Oli extended his arm again with his index finger pointing out meaning to shake hands, but the parrot climbed onto it.

“My name is Pardy,” said the parrot, as Oli stood up and brought Pardy up to his eye level.

“Would you like to see inside the ship and meet my friend Robbie?” said Oli, gesturing towards the gangway.

“Can we come as well?” several little voices chirped. Oli looked to see the other four parrots jumping about excitedly.

“Course you can,” said Oli offering both arms. Pardy side-stepped her way up Oli's arm and onto his shoulder to make room, and soon Oli was walking up the gangway with five parrots perched around his head.

Odd. Very odd, he thought.

They entered the cargo bay where the drone was busy stowing the Graviton Generator in a space that had opened in the wall. It was immediately enclosed in a force field, the door closed and the drone dissolved into a pile and scattered to the four corners of the room.

“That was the drone,” said Oli looking around to see where it had disappeared to. “It doesn’t say much.”

Oli walked to the control room and when the door opened, he felt all the parrots jump a little on his shoulders. *Glad it’s not just me then*, he thought with a wry grin.

“Robbie, I’d like you to meet some friends of mine.”

He introduced Pardy, and the others said their names were also Pardy, except one who was called Purdy. Apparently it was a very popular name amongst the parrots.

“Oli,” said Robbie, “I really don’t think it’s a good idea bringing an alien life form onto the ship, especially when they recently covered it with crap.”

“I’m sorry if that wasn’t to your liking,” said Pardy, her head darting about searching for the source of the voice. “It’s our traditional greeting to visitors, not that we ever get any. Some of us have suggested that it may be time to change it but you know how difficult it is to overcome tradition.”

“Might I suggest that you try a little harder.” Robbie’s voice had taken on a tone that Oli had never heard before. *He’s really not happy about being used as a bird toilet*, Oli thought, as he tried to stifle the snigger.

“You’re only our second set of visitors to this planet,” said Pardy. “The first didn’t look very friendly and only seemed interested in the contents of the ancient city.”

Pardy explained that the parrots lived in the forest surrounding the city and in many other forests around the continent. She invited them to visit the parrot capital before they left. Oli thought that this was a great idea and said they would follow Pardy and the others. He explained that they couldn’t stay for long because they had a planet to save.

“How exciting!” squawked Pardy.

Pardy, Pardy, Pardy and Purdy hopped off Oli's arms and waddled down the hallway to the exit. Halfway along the corridor they turned and waved a wing at Pardy, who was still perched on Oli's shoulder.

"Come on Pardy, we've got a long flight ahead of us," chirped Pardy.

"Ah...Can I ride in your ship please Oli? Please...Please?"

"Of course you can Pardy," said Oli turning to give a thumbs-up to the other parrots, who swivelled on their claws and continued to the cargo bay. Oli, with Pardy on his shoulder, walked to the edge of the gangway and waved as the parrots took to the sky in a flutter of colour. They re-joined the company and then headed off towards the forest, which lay about fifty kilometres south of Ahrna. The ship lifted off with the obligatory clunk of the legs. Back in the control room, Oli raised a hand for Pardy to climb onto and he gently lowered her onto a lever on the control panel, which made an excellent perch. Oli wanted to ask Robbie whether he thought that the parrots had evolved from the earth Parrot brought to Annenia 12 thousand years ago, but he didn't want to drop any bombshells in front of Pardy relating to her creation. For all he knew, they could believe that some omnipotent parrot god had seeded the planet with creatures made in his own image. Stranger things happen elsewhere, after all. They watched in silence as the buildings of Ahrna slid below, slowly replaced by dense forest. After about five minutes, Oli couldn't take it any longer.

"So...Pardy," Oli began, sensing Robbie shaking his non-existent head. "How long have you guys been here on Annenia? Do you have records of your history?"

"Yes Oli," said Pardy, unable to hide her excitement about the prospect of being the first one to talk to the Haman visitor. "We know that the first parrot was brought here from a place called Earth, and that the Annenians, who used to live in that great city, did some clever modifications to make it smart, and we know that the Annenians all died out soon after that."

Oli breathed a sigh of relief.

"Do you have any facts that you could add, Robbie?" asked Oli. "Of course, I'm assuming that you don't mind finding out about your beginnings, Pardy."

"Of course not," squawked Pardy. "This is very exciting."

Oli smiled at the sight of Pardy dancing around the length of the lever, virtually boiling over with anticipation.

Robbie explained about the parrot on the veanonberry tree and the demise of the Annenians. He then explained that in an attempt to solve the crisis and find a cure for the illness, the Annenians had cloned the female parrot with the green colouring, and improved its genetic code, so that the male parrot with the red and blue colouring that was subsequently produced might be able to help them. They had accelerated the growth of the bird so that it reached full adulthood in only one hour. Of course, even a genetically-enhanced parrot was not going to find a cure that had evaded the top scientists of Annenia, but it had only wasted a couple of hours and they were desperate.

The parrot must have escaped from the laboratory and somehow joined with the non-intelligent parrot from Earth. From this meeting emerged the first hybrid parrots, and over the course of the past twelve and a half thousand Earth years, they had built this civilisation which was now occupying Annenia.

Pardy looked stunned.

“So a parrot killed the Annenians,” she said, sounding slightly concerned.

“Not really,” offered Oli. “The Annenian who brought the alien life form back to Annenia without going through the proper quarantine procedure was responsible for the end of the Annenians.

“Phew,” said Pardy, immediately losing the air of concern that had descended upon her. “That’s a relief.”

It was a two hour flight at parrot speed to the city, so Oli took the opportunity to take a matrem. After all, if he was going to represent humanity in the first contact with an alien race, he would have to smarten himself up a bit. Pardy watched as the city of Ahrna disappeared from view. She’d seen it a thousand times, but never from the comfort of a ship.

CHAPTER 4

WELCOME TO PARDOO

A week had passed since the discovery of the asteroid and the President, under repeated instruction from his advisors, had decided not to inform the world. They would wait four days and continue to examine the trajectory of this increasingly menacing harbinger of catastrophe. Maybe they were mistaken, and as it approached the earth, their calculations would more accurately determine a near-miss scenario. He was sat at his desk watching a live feed from the Hubble Space Telescope. The asteroid was close enough now to receive a clear image. It was impossible to fully appreciate the scale, but he was able to clearly see the shape of the rock. It was not spherical like the moon, but was a more irregular shape, rather like a rugby ball with rounded ends and a few unsightly bulges at various points around it. The surface resembled that of the moon, in that it was heavily marked by craters. The sun was shining on the right hemisphere of the asteroid and this created menacing shadows across the flank. It was spinning around the vertical axis once every 27 minutes, so it had obviously been hit very hard by whatever object had set it on its present course.

President Daniels shook his head and looked away from the screen. He found himself mesmerised, looking into the eye of an unstoppable killer that would erase humanity from existence. His advisors had warned that the ensuing chaos if it became general knowledge would be inconceivable. Society would totally collapse. They could not even rely on the army to keep order, as the soldiers would be presented with the same feeling of hopelessness. How could you expect anyone to fight for something that was about to end? If they then found out that it was going to miss, it would have all been for nothing.

The newly formed *Asteroid Comity* would sit on the knowledge of the impending end of the world until three days before impact, and if it was then confirmed, they would inform the public. This would give everyone time to say their farewells. If it was going to hit, it was going to hit; there was nothing they could do. After all, this wasn't some Hollywood movie where they could launch an A-list celebrity into space to destroy it with a toothpick and a can opener. It was extremely real and it was

heading towards Earth at 60,000 kilometres per hour. Although, as one scientist pointed out, to his downfall, a more precise assessment would be that it was crossing the earth's orbit travelling at some 40,000 kilometres per hour and the earth was going to slam into it, travelling as it does at 108,000 kilometres per hour around the sun. The resulting impact, allowing for the angle of the asteroid's trajectory and the orbital path of the earth, would result in an impact of around 60,000 kilometres per hour. He wasn't invited to speak again. In fact, a more precise assessment would be to say that he was instructed to *never* speak again.

Two days before, President Daniels had attended a meeting with the top scientists in the country. Doctor Conway had been flown in from GASP. As the person who discovered the rock and the foremost expert in the world on all things asteroidal, he was expected to have some magical insights into how this problem might be solved. He had calculated the possible effect of ten nuclear missiles impacting the surface of the asteroid. There were only ten rockets in existence powerful enough to leave the earth's atmosphere and intercept the rock at a safe distance, but in every computer simulation the resultant explosion merely dented the surface and the asteroid continued relentlessly on its present course. It was too big and it was travelling too fast for any technology known to man to have any effect on it. The bottom line was that if this giant rock was actually heading directly for Earth - and the odds for that had now increased to 97% - it *would* hit and there was nothing anyone could do to prevent it.

Against all the cries of "you're wasting your time Mr President," President Daniels ordered the rockets to be made ready for launch. After all, even the minutest chance was better than no chance at all and these rockets and bombs were going to have even less effect sat in their silos. The President was informed that the rockets would be ready for launch the following day and would intercept the asteroid approximately six million kilometres from Earth. It was impossible to hide a ten-missile launch, so they had to come up with a cover story. The President informed the world powers that they were sending up ten new GPS satellites that would enhance the quality of the global positioning system to within one centimetre across the globe. No one really believed him and there followed a few days of furious diplomatic exchanges between the superpower states of Earth.

But the rockets blasted off on schedule from a top-secret missile base in the Nevada desert. They left the earth's atmosphere with a final burn, sending them around the earth and accelerating them to a previously unattained speed of 60,000 kilometres per hour, they blasted into space on their five day journey to intercept the asteroid. Everyone with knowledge of the asteroid was kept under close guard with no access to the outside world, and as several more observatories across the globe made the same discovery, they too were silenced.

Totally unaware of the impending devastation, Stephan had caught a plane back to London to make a report to his department at the Natural History Museum. He had no idea what he was going to say, but word had got back to them from some source; he was sure it wasn't Jaff. As he entered the Egyptology Department, he caught a glimpse of himself in the antique Moorish mirror that had been a gift from Jaff two years previously, and he concluded from the image of the hobo-like character staring back at him, that after this meeting he should get some rest. He entered his uncle's office and was ushered to sit in front of the panel of stern looking academics.

"I'm certain that you know why you're here Stephan," said Sir Rupert Evert, head of the department,

"He just disappeared Uncle," said Stephan, refusing the offer of a seat, instead choosing to lean on the desk with both hands in an act of defiance. "One second he was there, twenty metres up the passage, and the next he was gone. I cannot explain it any better than that. It was as though the floor opened up and swallowed him."

"Hmm," growled Sir Rupert, gazing intently at Stephan over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "And who exactly was this young fellow that led you to disobey operating protocol?"

Stephan explained how he'd met him on the plane and that he seemed like a nice chap and, let's face it, everyone disobeyed protocol. They sat in silence, listening attentively and when he had finished, offered him two weeks paid leave to 'pull himself together.' Stephan didn't utter a single word about Oli's phone call, or for that matter the streak of silver that appeared from beside the pyramid and shot out into space. He figured that he was sounding barmy enough without adding little

green men to the equation. Sir Rupert followed Stephan out of the stuffy room and put a hand on his shoulder, pulling him to a halt.

“I’m sure the young lad will turn up sooner or later Stephan,” he reassured him. “He’s probably just playing a practical joke on you. Now go and have some rest. I know,” he exclaimed, turning to place his other hand on Stephan’s right shoulder, “why don’t you spend a few days in Cornwall? It’ll be good for the old place to have some company for a while. It’s been lying empty for well over a year.”

He reached into his voluminous pocket and pulled out a huge bunch of keys. After what seemed like an eternity of sifting through the multitude of chinking pieces of metal, he began to push a pair of ancient looking keys around the ring that secured them to the bunch. Stephan knew that these were the keys to his uncle’s country retreat located on the cliffs of Cornwall, looking out to the stormy Atlantic Ocean. Stephan had many fond memories of spending weekends at this sprawling country house as a child. It was every child’s dream house, with thousands of hiding places and grounds that you could get lost in for days on end. There were, apparently, secret tunnels under the house connecting with old tin mines, but Stephan had never been allowed to explore those for obvious reasons.

“Thanks Uncle,” said Stephan, reaching for the keys, “I may just do that.”

Stephan spent that night in his flat in Chelsea, attempting to reach the bottom of a bottle of vodka. After several hours of such abuse, he fell into a drunken sleep on his couch. He hadn’t slept properly for five days and he remained in the same position for fifteen hours, where he awoke the following afternoon, feeling as though he might expire at any minute. Stephan was never really much of a drinker. When he was at university, his friends would invite him to parties knowing full well that he would fall asleep after a few drinks and would become someone else’s responsibility.

He immediately assumed that he’d dreamt the whole thing but that blissful state only lasted a few seconds. He came to the disappointing conclusion that there was nothing more he could do. He might as well accept his uncle’s offer, head off to Cornwall and hope that Oli would turn up sometime, somewhere. At that moment his phone rang. He stumbled out of the chair, struggling at first to operate

the lever to move the recliner into the upright position. He kicked over the almost empty bottle of vodka and reached for the receiver.

“Yes, Stephan here,” he said, his gravelly voice exposing the fact that he’d also consumed an entire packet of cigarettes. He grimaced as out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the repulsive sight of the overflowing ashtray.

“Hi Stephan, it's Oli.”

“Oli? Where the hell are you? What the hell happened? Where the hell are you?” Stephan was aware that he was shouting, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“I’m fine.”

Stephan was sure he heard Oli whispering.

“Who are you talking to? Where are you?” shouted Stephan.

“Everything’s fine Stephan. I’ve been away for a few days but I’m on my way home now. I should be back in about five days and I promise to tell you everything. See you soon.” And with that, the phone went dead. Stephan dialled 1471, for the service that identifies the number, but the recorded voice simply notified him that the caller had withheld their ID.

*

“I think we should also call someone in authority on Earth,” Oli said. “If they’ve seen that rock coming towards them, they’re going to be flapping.”

“They have detected it Oli, but they’ve decided not to tell anyone until they’re certain that it will hit. We have a few days before we need to make that call.”

Oli’s eyes returned to the screen where the parrots had just reached the edge of the forest. About a kilometre ahead, there was a sudden eruption of colour from the tree tops as the entire population of the city, whom Oli later found out were mostly named Pardy, had come out to welcome the visitors. Pardy was jumping from claw to claw in her excitement. As they approached a clearing in the forest, about one hundred metres across, Oli could hear the patter of thousands of little claws on the top of the ship.

“I do hope they don’t plan to welcome us again,” said Robbie, sounding like an old maid who had just completed a spring clean.

Pardy pointed with a wing to the clearing. Oli heard the clunk of the legs and the ship descended into the canopy to touch down on a bright green meadow not much bigger than a tennis court.

“Why don’t you come with me, Robbie?” asked Oli. “If you can see and hear through the drone, you might enjoy it.”

“I was going to Oli,” Robbie said as the dust on the floor gathered by the control room door and began to take shape. “You don’t think that I would let you go into an alien environment alone, do you?”

The cargo bay door opened and Oli looked out to a sea of green and red circling above, filling the entire clearing and blocking out the sky. Pardy was standing on his shoulder, waving her wing at one of her friends who had flown down to see the spectacle.

“Everyone is very excited Oli.” she said, dancing on the spot. “You’re the first visitor to our city.”

“Visitors,” stated Robbie.

They walked down the gangway and Oli felt the soft vegetation underfoot. It was similar to grass, but the blades were much thicker, it was like walking on a very expensive shag-pile carpet. There were no squawking sounds as you would expect from thousands of parrots, just lots of chatter.

Oli heard, “Oh look, isn’t it big!” and “what’s that behind it?” He pointed out to Pardy that he was the male of his species and the word “it” was not really very complimentary. She looked shocked and asked why his people had sent a male to do a females work. Oli just made a ‘you’ve got me there’ gesture with his hands. She explained that the females ruled the parrot civilisation and made all the important decisions; the males were just for breeding, working and cleaning. Something strange had happened in the cloning process and the female offspring were forty percent more intelligent than the males. Oli explained as they walked towards the forest, that on Earth, male and female humans were usually equal, but up until recent history, males were in charge. Pardy found this very amusing and couldn’t wait to tell the others.

They walked into the thick forest. There were no pathways so the drone moved ahead, formed a metre-long curved blade out of one arm and cleared the way. *That drone would be very handy in a pinch up*, thought Oli. It swiped and slashed its way through the undergrowth. At one point the blade impacted on something hard, the drone bent down, thrust its hand into the foliage and lifted out one end of a massive log. It held aloft the end, which Oli was sure must have weighed at least half a tonne, and tossed it to one side as though it were discarding an unwanted stick. Pardy and Oli exchanged looks. Neither was really sure whether to be impressed or concerned. They continued through the bush for another ten minutes when Pardy announced proudly, “Here we are Oli, the city of Pardoo.”

Now Oli didn't want to be unimpressed by their efforts of the last twelve thousand years, but it just looked like a load of bushes and tree trunks.

“Mm!” he hummed. “Very...ah...”

“Not there Oli,” she said, “up in the trees.”

Oli bent his neck back as far as it would go.

“Wow!” he exclaimed as the sight of the parrot city filled his view.

Covering all the trees, from about twenty metres up to the top of the canopy, there were little houses and much larger structures; well large if you were a parrot. The buildings were beautifully made, with such ornate designs that would put a Thai temple to shame, and they were painted in all the colours of the rainbow. The city was a master class in building within the environment, as all the buildings seemed to emerge, seamlessly from the trees. Linking all the trees was a maze of transparent tubes about the width of a water slide. They criss-crossed each other, curved around trees and disappeared vertically into the canopies up the sides of every tree that he could see. There were thousands of these tubes connecting thousands of trees. Oli squinted to see something moving in one of the tubes, and then he realised it was a train, about twenty metres long and travelling at a considerable speed. Once he'd become accustomed to the sight of one train, he realised that there were hundreds of similar vehicles silently careering through the tubes. One such train plummeted down the closest vertical tube and stopped at the end, just a few metres above his head. The vehicle inside the tube was as transparent as the tube itself and it was full of parrots, standing on gimble perches. Oli

gave them a wave and as one, they raised their wings to return the greeting. In the darkness of the forest, the light from buildings shimmered as the wind blew the branches and leaves.

“It’s stunning,” said Oli, getting a stiff neck, like a tourist visiting New York City for the first time.

“Thank you Oli,” said Pardy, also with her head tilted back. “We’re very proud of it.”

“How many parrots live here?” asked Oli.

“Oh, there are about two million living in Pardoo, but we have other cities around the planet.”

Oli questioned, if they had the ability to build such a city, why they didn’t have planes. Pardy explained that they did have machines that flew at great speed, but they simply loved to fly au naturelle and only used the machines to visit other cities around the planet. But this was a rare occurrence, because they had all they needed right here. All of the technology that was utilised in the city had been lifted from the ancient city. They had been living like this for two thousand years and were really quite contented with their lot.

“What do you use for money?” asked Oli.

“Money? What’s money?”

“Money,” he reiterated, rubbing his thumb and first two fingers together, expecting the repetition of the same word to make it more easily understood.

“How did you pay for all this? How did you pay the builders who built it?”

“We just built it,” said Pardy, looking more confused than ever. “Nobody needed...what did you call it?...Paying? It just got built. If a young parrot wants to leave home and join with another parrot, everyone gets together and builds them a home. If the city needs a new building, we all come together and build it. I’m sorry Oli, I don’t understand what you mean by money.”

“Wow,” said Oli.

Pardy explained that she wanted desperately to show Oli the inside of the city, but it was impossible; he was too big. She explained that he would meet the elders in the sports arena, which was in the centre of the city. They continued through the undergrowth with the drone hacking at the bushes. The parrots paid no attention to anything below about ten metres above the ground. They lived in the trees and never went for walks along the ground, so it was totally overgrown. Oli kept on

tripping over branches on the ground because he was constantly craning his neck to take in the view. He walked right under one building that occupied an entire tree, from the height of his four-storey block of flats in Fulham, right to the canopy two hundred metres above. The building snaked around the trunk like a giant python slithering its way to the canopy. Another tree had about twenty disk-shaped structures, the largest one of which enveloped the mighty trunk, twenty metres from the ground. The disks lay horizontally, decreasing in size as they rose up the tree, with lift tubes connecting all the disks. Oli became transfixed, watching the lifts going up and down. He wished that he could drink a little bottle of liquid that made him shrink so that he could explore the city. But his name was not Alice, even though this place could quite easily carry the moniker; *Wonderland*.

“What happens when the trees grow Pardy?” asked Oli.

“The biggest trees stopped growing hundreds of years ago,” she replied. “If we build on a tree that is still growing, we build expanding joints into everything and so the buildings grow with the trees.”

“Smart,” said Oli, nodding his head approvingly.

Oli could see an area of light materialising from the forest ahead. He was still looking up and had noticed that there were many more buildings than before and he assumed that they must be near the centre. Some of the trees were completely covered with buildings, but still blended perfectly with the surrounding forest. As they entered the area of light, Oli let out another “woaw.” Four giant trees, half a kilometre high with trunks as wide as a house, had been stripped of all their branches except for the canopy where they met. They were curved into each other from each corner of an opening in the forest. The opening was the size of a football stadium and the giant trees appeared to be connected to each other at the top. There were thousands of rows of thin, curved sticks arcing between the four trees. As the place began to fill from above, Oli realised that these were the perches.

“This is the sports arena Oli. We play many games here, but the favourite is called wingsphere.”

Oli listened as Pardy described the game. He prided himself on being the biggest anti-fan of football that it was possible to be and was really quite fed up with hearing nothing but football from his friends, on the television and in fact, everywhere he looked. He was constantly bombarded with

images of over-paid and over-manicured idiots in shorts. The thought that it might be a universal sport was giving him the jitters.

The game, Pardy explained, was played with a weightless sphere that was buoyant in air, a technology that they had taken from an Annenian cargo trailer. There were two teams, fifty players in each, with two rectangular goals, about two metres wide, halfway between the ground and the top of the trees. The parrots used their wings to hit the ball, which in flight, required a huge amount of skill. Windsphere was played and loved by all the parrots; male and female and Pardy proudly explained that she used to play for her local school's team. The arena would usually be surrounded by netting to prevent the ball from escaping, but Pardy told Oli that it was out of season now and another game was played at this time of year. A game that she really didn't understand. The game was played with a different shaped ball and you were allowed to pick it up and fly with it. She looked at him and threw her head back with a tutting sound. Oli's only possible response, was a blank look with one raised eyebrow.

She instructed him to walk over to the far side of the arena where the elders were gathered on a circular platform, surrounding the lowest part of the tree, about two metres from the ground. All the trees were now covered with birds. There wasn't a single free perch in the arena. The stadium couldn't hold the entire population of the city, but every parrot wanted to see the human visitor, so the sky above the stadium was awash with the colours of thousands of birds. As Oli reached the balcony of the elders, one of them held out a wing and the noise of the crowd slowly died down.

"Welcome to Pardoo," said the parrot in the middle of the group of five.

"Thanks very much," said Oli. "I love your city." He thought about extending an arm, but it would probably be viewed as somewhat undignified for an elder to go climbing all over their first guest from another planet.

"My name is Pardy, and I am the premier of this city. Can you tell me why you have come here?"

Oli explained about the Annenians, the pyramid, the asteroid and his need to get back fairly soon to prevent disaster. He became quite animated as he was telling the story, especially when he realised that his voice was being broadcast around the stadium. The premier explained how they knew about

the Annenians and the Hamans on Earth. They had finally managed to operate some of the Annenian machines and retrieved a few records. It had been a bit of a shock at first because they once believed that the supreme parrot had created them. They worshipped her and gave thanks for their lives. So when they discovered that they had come from a single bird that was genetically altered to make them what they are today, they had to rethink somewhat. Oli knew all this but let the premier have her moment. He just gave a little wink to Pardy and heard her giggle in his ear.

The parrots embraced the philosophy that they should live, be happy and once a year give thanks to their creators. So on the longest day of the year, they had a huge party in honour of the Annenians. They had managed to use some of the technology to construct their cities but they hadn't ventured out into space, although they knew that the Annenians travelled to other planets. There didn't really seem much point when they had everything that they could ever need right where they were. Oli congratulated them on their magnificent city and said that when he had more time he would like to come back and visit again. He could feel Pardy's little feet dancing on his shoulder, and it was obvious that she wanted to say something, so he turned his head to one side to look at her.

"Do you think...ahm...it would be possible...ahm...for me to come back to Earth with you? I would so love to see it."

Pardy could remember her school days, when she was the only parrot who showed any interest in learning about the stars. They had little knowledge of how the universe worked but she knew one thing, and that was that one day she wanted to travel out there amongst the stars as the Annenians had once done.

"Well, I don't have a problem with that. Do you Robbie?" He turned the other way to look at the drone that was standing by his side.

"If she wants to come, she can Oli, but I don't know when we'll be coming back this way again. It may be some time."

Oli had drifted off, wondering from which part of the drone the voice was emanating. The parrot elders were craning their necks, trying to see what had captured the attention of the strange Haman.

“Excellent!” he said, eventually, once again devoting his full attention to the matter in hand. “It’ll be great to have you along, that’s if it’s okay with your elders.”

He glanced up at the five elders, who were whispering to each other. Finally, the premier held up a wing and they all looked at Oli.

“Yes, yes, yes, of course, that’ll be fine,” she said, dismissively waving a wing towards Pardy as though shoos away an irksome insect. Maybe if you get this travel bug out of your system you might settle down a bit.” Oli later discovered that the premier was Pardy’s aunty, and she was always despairing at Pardy’s inability to concentrate on any subject for more than a few minutes.

“And when you return,” the premier continued, “we’ll have a big party.”

Oli was starting to suspect that all they ever did here was play games and have parties. He was definitely coming back. With that, the premier picked up a stick with her claw. The stick had a soft round ball on one end and she made a move to hit a tiny gong that was hanging behind her. Oli wondered who was going to hear the minute sound that would surely spring from such a tiny instrument. The premier drew back her stick, waited a second and then swung at the tiny gong with all her might. The deafening sound that emerged seemed to radiate from all around the stadium. The trees shook and the bushes rustled. The very ground on which Oli was standing, appeared to take part in the audio avalanche.

Looks can be deceiving, he thought.

All at once, lavishly costumed parrots appeared from all around the stadium. Some were trailing banners behind them as they flew; some were performing aerobatics, zigzagging in and out of each other with long multi-coloured tails of fabric mimicking their every move. The music that was now filling the air was largely percussion-based and Oli could feel his right foot starting to follow the beat. He then realised, at the far end of the stadium, the music was being played by a live band. He counted about fifty parrots all banging away on unfeasibly small bongos, some with their claws and others with their beaks. The instruments were tiny and yet the sound was filling the stadium and the forest around it. *So they have discovered the joys of amplification,* he grinned. Next to the drummers, was another smaller group of musicians blowing into long pipes. The bases of the pipes were resting on the

ground a couple of metres below the perches and the parrots were leaning forward and blowing into them. Each pipe had three other parrots moving up and down the length of the instrument, apparently covering various holes with pads that were attached to their claws and wing tips. All their movements on the pipes were exquisitely choreographed. The sound of these pipes was similar to something that Oli had once heard at a medieval music festival, but much louder. By now, Oli was fully immersed in the whole affair and was dancing around in front of the premier like a flea in a jar. Pardy was holding on with all her might, as Oli's gyrations did their best to topple her.

Oli's dancing technique was in no way elegant. His arms and legs flailed around him, but it had always been highly infectious. He could be the only person dancing in a club, but within a few minutes of him firing up the move machine, you could guarantee the dance floor would start to fill.

Oli looked up and he could see all the parrots on the perches around the stadium also dancing and swaying. The effect created a rippling movement of green and red throughout the enormous structure. Even the parrots who couldn't get a perch were dancing in the air above the stadium. *What a party*, thought Oli. It went on for about half an hour with more aerobatics, music and colourful displays, then all of a sudden, the flying birds disappeared through the top of the four trees and the music stopped.

"Wow," said Oli, his arms open wide towards the parrot premier, "you guys know how to put on a show."

"Well, we don't get many guests," said the premier, "so we wanted to make you feel welcome."

"That you have my friend. That you have."

They said their farewells. Oli waved both arms in the air whilst turning to face every part of the arena and to the cheers of the thousands of parrots overhead they left and walked back down the freshly created track towards the ship. Pardy darted off into the trees to say goodbye to her mother and sister and when Oli and the drone reached the ship she was already there, waiting at the top of the gangway, fidgeting enthusiastically. Her mother was fussing away next to her, telling her to be careful and to come home soon whilst rearranging her head feathers. Her sister, who was only an infant, was looking into the ship and dancing with such excitement that she deposited a little message on the gangway. Oli chuckled as he heard Robbie's groan from inside the ship.

After a brief tour of the ship for Pardy's family they said their farewells, and Mrs. Pardy and her youngest daughter hopped off the gangway, allowing it to close.

"Right," said Oli, "home James."

"I could be mistaken Oli, but I seem to recall that you offered me the designation, Robbie," said Robbie, obviously still lacking a few of the finer points of the English language.

The ship lifted off, surrounded by flying birds, and Pardy remained glued to the screen as they flew out over the forest and began a steep climb out of the atmosphere. Robbie changed half of the screen to a rear view and Pardy let out a little squawk as the forest rapidly shrunk to the size of a veanon berry. They held position above the planet for Pardy to take it in. She had seen pictures of the planet from the Annenian archives, but this was something else. Oli could see a small tear running down Pardy's cheek but he didn't say anything. He remembered how it had affected him when he saw Earth from space. Then Annenia became smaller and smaller, until it disappeared completely.

"Anything you need for your comfort Pardy, just ask Robbie," Oli said, placing a hand to his shoulder. She climbed onto it and he gently placed her on the lever in the middle of the control panel. She asked Robbie for a perch next to Oli's chair. Robbie had already thought of that while they were walking back from the city, and a black stick with a perch on top slid out from the left hand wall. She flapped her wings and flew onto it. She informed Robbie that her diet consisted mainly of fruit and seeds, which the food unit could easily produce, having a thorough knowledge of the indigenous flora of Annenia.

Robbie set to work with the micro-drones, constructing the link system for the Graviton Generator whilst Oli showed Pardy around the ship.

CHAPTER 5

ROCK 'N' ROLL

“Mr President Sir, this is Doctor Conway at GASP. I’m afraid that our calculations have been verified. The asteroid will strike the earth somewhere in the region of the West coast of Africa on the morning of February 14th. Destruction will be absolute.”

Silence.

“Mr President?”

“And you’re absolutely certain?”

“Yes Sir. Absolutely.”

“Thank you, Doctor Conway.”

The line went dead.

“Well Robbie,” said Oli, hurtling through the vastness of space. “I suppose that we’d better tell them that we’ve got this one.”

They’d been listening in on the President’s secure line. They were four and a half days into the journey home. Robbie decided that rather than have a global panic, they would attempt to convince the President that an out of work musician in a space ship left on Earth twelve and a half thousand years ago was going to stop a 255 kilometre wide asteroid from hitting the earth.

“D’you think he’ll buy it?” asked Oli.

“Let’s call him and find out,” said Robbie.

The sound of a ringing tone filled the control room.

“Yes, this is the President.”

“Ah, hi,” Oli said. “Look, this is going to sound a bit far fetched, but you have to trust me.”

“Who is this?” barked the President.

“I’m Oli and I’m in a spaceship bound for Earth. We have the ability to stop that rock from hitting the planet and I’ll be there in one day. You have to hold off telling the public for twenty four hours.”

“How did you get this number? Who the hell are you?”

Robbie cut the line.

Doctor Conway and his assistant were among the select few who knew the truth. Following the meeting in Washington, he had been flown back to his observatory to keep track of the asteroid. The President decided that it would be a good call to wait one more day, not because of Oli’s phone call, but because the Yankees were playing the Redskins that evening and if he was going to die along with everyone else, he wanted to enjoy one more game.

The two burly FBI agents outside Doctor Conway’s door were as silent as ever. They didn’t know why these people were being detained in their office. They were instructed to bring regular meals from the local five-star Player Palace and that was all the information that they required. Doctor Conway had tried to convince them that there was a rock the size of Florida on its way to spell the end for humanity, but that seemed to be a little out of the range of the average FBI agents imagination, so he’d resigned himself to the fact that they were all going to die. At least he would get to spend a few days with Catherine his wife, and their two adorable kids. He’d devoted his life to searching for the planet killer, the existence of which was inevitable. Four years at Cambridge, then another three years for his masters, and a PhD on placement at various observatories around the world. His PhD had been written on the construction of the solar system. It was while researching his doctorate that he was amazed to discover just how many pieces of rock were floating about in the asteroid belt, left over from the early days of formation. He began to map the largest of these asteroids, naming them and projecting their courses for the next one hundred years. He soon realised that the road on which he had set out, was going to become a lifetime's work. He discovered that the rocks were cruising through space, between the inner and outer planets and he came to the conclusion that on the whole, they would probably not alter their orbit to cross the path of the earth. But one day, he was sitting on his porch with a cold beer, watching his son Adam playing in the garden. He had made a circle out of

string and placed some marbles in the centre and was trying to knock the marbles out with other marbles. Doctor Conway was proud of his boy's ability to entertain himself and a smile appeared on his face. Then, as Adam managed to hit one of the marbles and it flew out of the ring, the smile suddenly disappeared.

From that moment on, he had devoted his life to searching the skies for a rogue asteroid that had been knocked off its orbital course. It was difficult to get the funding because nobody in power took the threat seriously. It always astounded him that they would spend billions of dollars, developing new ways to kill each other, but could barely scrape together one million to detect something that could wipe out their entire species. But now that he'd succeeded in his work and had found the asteroid, he realised that he hadn't given a moment's thought to the action he would take if he succeeded. He just sat there, dwelling on the image of his son playing marbles, hoping that he would actually get a chance to see his family before the end.

*

Following four days travelling, playing games and learning more about the universe, everything was ready on board the ship. The Graviton Generator had been sparked into life, safely contained within a force field. It was throbbing away in anticipation of its task. It would be linked in series to six booster stations positioned around the asteroid and would create a negative gravity field around the rock that would in effect render it weightless. The rock could then be disposed of as one would discard a pebble that had become lodged in the sole of a shoe. Robbie had briefed Oli on the procedure. They planned to land on the rock, Oli and the drone would fix the Generator in position, and then they would fly around the rock, dropping off the booster stations as they went. Robbie hadn't yet decided what to do with the asteroid once its progress had been halted. They would probably dump it into the sun, which could swallow thousands of similar objects without so much as a belch.

"Have I got to put on a spacesuit then?" asked Oli, longing to go outside the ship and bounce around like a balloon at a children's birthday party.

"No Oli. The Annenians developed a far more efficient form of EVA."

A small flap opened on the control panel and Oli leant forward to see what it contained. As he looked in, the light reflected off a silver ring; very plain looking, with no diamonds or any other kind of stone. Just a plain silver ring. Robbie explained that the ring generated an impenetrable field around the wearer and created an atmosphere of any required constitution for as long as the ring was worn. It also created a highly localised gravity field when required, at the feet of the wearer. So he would be able to walk on the asteroid as though he were taking a stroll through Regents Park. The force field protected the wearer from all known hazards and some that were mere theories. One Annenian student of medicine had lost a game of Gabble and as a forfeit, had to walk through the corona of a neighbouring star wearing just the ring and a toga, which was actually the preferred attire of the Annenians. The student emerged from the star with a cold.

“Does it have a name?” asked Oli.

“Like everything Annenian,” Robbie explained, “there is no literal translation, but the best approximation that I can find, would be Go-Ring.”

The Annenians never fought any wars as they found them rather pointless and did their utmost to avoid any form of conflict, but if they had been dragged into any kind of confrontation, the rings would have made them invincible. The wearers were impervious to all things that could harm them. No bullets, lasers, rockets or even Celine Dion records could penetrate the shield around the wearer. Pardy had hopped off her perch onto the control panel and was eyeing the ring with a birdlike desire for shiny things.

“It looks a bit big for you,” said Oli. It even looked too large for Oli’s bony fingers. He began to wonder how big these Annenians actually were. Unable to accept *no* for an answer, Pardy held out a claw expectantly. Oli picked up the ring and slid it over her claw so that it was resting around her ankle like an over-sized message on a carrier pigeon. To their amazement, the ring immediately shrank to become a perfect fit around her tiny ankle. She could barely feel its presence and she tapped her claw on the control desk to see if it was loose, but it had contracted to form a perfect fit.

“Is it working?” asked Oli, not seeing anything that would indicate an impenetrable force field.

“Yes, Oli. Try to hit her.”

Oli gave a little flick with his right hand. It was like flicking a lump of rock and he shook his hand to discard the stinging pain. Pardy didn't move.

"Is that the best you can do?" said Pardy, dancing around the panel like Mohammed Pardi, curling the ends of her wings in, beckoning Oli to try harder. Oli gave her a gentle slap on the side of her body.

"Ouch!" he yelped.

Pardy started to taunt him by dancing in front of him and calling the parrot version of 'Na na na Na na', which by some strange quirk of fate was 'Na na na Na na'.

Oli, nursing his stinging fingers, decided that he was convinced.

"I want to go for a walk outside the ship," he said, reaching out to take the ring from Pardy's claw.

"I want to come too," said Pardy.

"Okay," said Robbie, "but stay on Oli's shoulder. We only have one ring, and if you jump off, the field will be broken and you really will be the first parrot in space."

Pardy held out her claw and as Oli pulled the ring it expanded and slipped off easily. He placed it on his right hand index finger and it immediately shrank to fit. Robbie directed them to the second cargo room on the right of the corridor, where there was a hatch leading to the roof of the ship. In his excitement to step into the void of space, Oli forgot about the doors for the first time in a while.

Psst.

"Woa!"

"Quark," (parrot for woa!)

When they entered the cargo bay, the door closed behind them and a hatch slid open in the ceiling, revealing the universe in all its glory.

"Stand directly below the hatch Oli," said Robbie.

Oli moved over to the middle of the room and looked up into the void. Then a portion of the floor, the same size as the hatch, began to rise. In no time, Oli and Pardy were standing on the roof of the ship.

"Wow!" said Pardy.

“Double Wow!” said Oli.

The nano-drones had cleaned all the parrot droppings from the top of the ship and it was gleaming, even in the jet black of interstellar space. The distant stars glistened and reflected off the hull. He moved his left foot a few inches without taking it off the surface and was surprised to find that it felt exactly the same as walking inside the ship. As he became more confident with the ability of the ring, he took larger steps until he was walking normally. He went for a little stroll to the front, bow, or whatever it was they called the sharp end of a spaceship and sat down on the end with his feet dangling over the edge. He'd developed a keen trust for Annenian technology and wasn't in the least bit worried. But he could tell from the grip of Pardy's claws in his shoulder that she wasn't letting go for all the seeds in Pardu. They sat there for over an hour, looking at the stars. The brightest was directly ahead and he assumed that must be the sun. It was the size of a ten pence piece and seemed to be growing all the time. He could make out some of the constellations that he knew, although one or two of them had changed shape slightly due to their change in position. Even considering the immense distances to the stars, the ship was travelling so fast that he could perceive some movement if he looked at the same area for a minute or two. The closer stars would appear to move across the more distant ones. For a visual treat, Robbie had altered their course slightly to take them within a few million kilometres of a star. He cut the graviton generator and coasted through the system at several times the speed of light. Within the space of thirty seconds it had become the size of a football, then it was along side and thirty seconds later they'd left it behind, narrowly avoiding a gas giant planet, similar to Jupiter but purple.

“Wow,” said Oli. “I take it that wasn't the sun, then.”

“Correct Oli.” Robbie's voice appeared from nowhere.

“Can you hear us out here then Robbie?” asked Oli, relieved that he hadn't joked with Pardy about their synthetic friend.

“Yes Oli,” came the phantom reply, “When you wear the Go-ring, you are directly connected to the ship.”

As they sat there marvelling at the clarity of the universe around them, they talked about their own worlds. Oli explained to Pardy how Humans have a real problem with getting along together, but that it was still an exceptional place to be. He told her about clubbing, playing drums in the band and surfing the waves in Cornwall. She talked excitedly about her family and her work. She worked in the public library records department and so her knowledge of the Annenians was extensive. She'd read reports on the genetic alterations carried out on Hamans, but never thought that she would actually get to meet one, let alone sit on the roof of a space ship hurtling through space with one. They sat for a while longer in silence, taking in the view and the weirdness of it all. Finally, they decided to go back inside. They descended into the cargo bay and walked silently back to the control room. Oli sat down and Pardy jumped onto her perch. Not a word was said for five minutes. Then Robbie couldn't take any more.

“Did you enjoy that?”

“Oh yes!” they both said in unison.

“We will be arriving in the earth system in twelve hours,” Robbie said. “I suggest that you both get some rest before then.”

Oli went to his room and dreamt about surfing, as usual and Pardy went to her perch and dreamt about flying, as usual. She loved to take to the air but now she had flown where no other parrot had ever flown before. She couldn't wait to tell her mum.

When they awoke, the sun was glowing in the middle of the screen, about the size of a tennis ball. But what caught Oli's eye was the colourful marble sized object just off to the right.

“That's Jupiter,” offered Robbie, anticipating Oli's question.

“Can we go and have a look?” asked Oli, leaning excitedly on the control panel.

With that, the ship banked, the sun moved to the side of the screen and Jupiter began to grow and grow. It took a few minutes, travelling at a relativistic speed before they were hurtling around the equator of the vast gas giant. They passed close by the moons of Io, Ganymede and Callisto. Then Robbie slowed the ship down for a closer look at Europa.

“There’s life on this moon,” said Robbie, “but not as we know it,” he continued, in a mock American accent much to Oli’s amusement. “Fancy a closer look?”

He didn’t really have to ask. Oli was hardly likely to say; *well actually Robbie, do you mind if we pass on this other worldly experience and get back to London?* As they flew over the surface of the moon, Oli marvelled at the mountains of ice and the deep fissures, as though a great axe had split the surface open for mile upon mile. They came in to land on a great icy plateau that stretched to the horizon, which was occupied by the northern hemisphere of Jupiter. Oli asked Robbie to hold it there for a minute to enable him to take in this unbelievable sight. Everyone had seen the photos sent back from the Voyager space craft and from Hubble, but Oli was the first Human to actually see Jupiter from the surface of one of the many moons that are held in orbit by its massive gravity well. He pulled his camera from his pocket and took a photo of the mind-blowing sight.

Robbie engaged the Matter Transform and they descended through the three kilometre crust of ice. After about five minutes, they burst into an ocean of crystal clear water. Robbie turned on the lights allowing them to see into the featureless distance. The gnarly underbelly of the ice disappeared into the darkness. They descended vertically into the abyss and Oli began to wonder how anything could live in such a forbidding place. After several minutes, Robbie announced that they were five kilometres below the icy surface. Oli could now see the bottom of the ocean. It was like flying over a forest of huge trees but as they descended further, it became clear that the trees were columns of rock, taller than the highest skyscraper and tapering to a narrow point. As Robbie took the ship into the middle of the monolithic forest and slowed to a crawl, Oli could appreciate the surface of these distorted cone-shaped edifices. To his surprise, they were alive with small shimmering creatures. The water around them was itself shimmering with the heat being generated at the base of the cone by the volcanic activity bursting through the crust of the moon.

The creatures, none of which were larger than Oli’s hand, swarmed around the surface of the rock tower. They were all different shapes and sizes. Some had rows of legs that scurried for purchase on the jagged rock. Others were just blobs of slimy-looking flesh that wriggled their way through the hot water.

Every now and then one of the creatures would flash a bright display of coloured light. Then as though in response, another nearby would radiate the same impressive display and add a few of its own illuminations. As Oli's eyes became accustomed to the surroundings, Robbie dimmed the lights and the entire rock forest lit up in a magical wash of colour. With the outside lights and those in the ship turned off, the full extent of this light show became apparent. The tiny creatures were creating so much light that the rocks around them became visible in the ambient glow, and as the light reacted with the shimmering heat, the whole forest seemed to sway in time to an inaudible symphony. Oli found himself swaying along to the ghostly ballet, quite lost in the magnificence of it all. The ship was stationary but Robbie was zooming in on various creatures and then zooming out to take in the whole scene.

"So you see Oli," whispered Robbie, not wanting to disturb Oli's enjoyment, "life comes in all shapes and sizes. These creatures have been around for considerably longer than Humans. They've adapted to this harsh environment and would not survive anywhere else."

Robbie left Oli and Pardy alone for a while to sway with the forest then slowly backed the ship away from the seabed so that they could take in a more expanded view. There must have been billions of the creatures lighting up the entire seabed as far as the eye could see. As they moved further away, the light became dimmer until the screen couldn't register anything, and Robbie slowly turned the lights on.

"That was truly outstanding," sighed Oli, slumping back into the seat with Pardy, equally astounded on his shoulder. "Thanks for that Robbie. That one's gonna be lodged in the old memory banks for a while."

They left Jupiter and its moons and headed straight for the sun. At this time, the earth was behind the sun as viewed from Jupiter. Oli was slowly getting his head around the orbits of the planets, but it was a little too three-dimensional for him to totally understand. The Sun was occupying most of the screen now. The radiation shields meant that Oli could look directly into it and watch the arcs of plasma bursting from the surface. He'd seen the very same images on the internet, but it could never have prepared him for the real thing. They had breakfast whilst watching one of the greatest spectacles

in the universe. Oli opted for an Annenian bean bun with lashings of golden syrup. Pardy had some dried fruit and seeds. As they finished their breakfast, the sun slipped off the side of the screen and Oli felt a warm glow as he did when he regularly returned to his beloved Cornwall to go surfing. His eyes were glued to the screen looking for signs of Earth when out of the black, in a flash, appeared a huge rock, filling the entire field of vision. He nearly fell off his seat and the lukewarm Annenian Karfee slopped into his lap.

“We’re here!” announced Robbie, feeling rather proud of his extra cautious approach to the asteroid. He’d come in at close to light speed but at the last second had slowed to 220,000 kilometres per second.

“You don’t say,” said Oli, wiping the Karfee from his crotch.

They were positioned just fifty metres above the middle of the rock looking along the surface. It was massive. A smooth rocky landscape disappearing into the darkness of space. The surface was dark grey and had been marked by the impacts of thousands of small objects as it had silently wandered through the solar system for hundreds of millions of years. The stars were rising over the edge of the rock as it continued its repetitious rotation. The drone appeared in the doorway of the control room and as Oli turned he jumped a little. *I never used to be this jumpy*, he thought. He guessed it must be all the way out stuff that was going on. He convinced himself that any one would have been slightly frazzled in his position.

“I’m going to land here Oli. Go with the drone and help position the Graviton Generator.”

Oli followed the drone to the first cargo bay, where the device was sitting on a tripod stand. The top of the stand had a bar through the middle, protruding either side to provide a carrying handle. Oli slipped the ring on his finger and stood by the stand. The door opened and the gangway extended to the surface of the rock. They carried the Generator onto the dusty surface, walked a little way from the ship and set it down. The drone used a gun that appeared from its chest to bolt the legs of the tripod to the rock. Oli was looking around admiring the view as the asteroid rotated. Just then, a familiar but very small, blue and green object appeared on the horizon. It was no bigger than a one penny piece, but it still looked fantastic. He couldn’t wait to get back and go clubbing.

As Oli disappeared into Oli world for a while, the drone finished securing the Generator and returned to the ship.

“Are you coming Oli?” Robbie’s voice sounded from nowhere in particular. Oli took a quick picture then dragged himself away from the view and re-joined the ship. They took off and headed to the far side of the rock to position the first of the six booster stations, then continued to the next point to repeat the operation. One and a half hours later, they were securing the final station. The drone fired the bolts into the three legs and they turned to face the ship, but it was gone.

“Robbie?” inquired Oli. As he searched the starlit void above, he caught a glimpse of the ship shooting across the space in front of the asteroid.

“It would appear,” said Robbie, “that the clever little monkeys have fired ten nuclear warheads at the asteroid. I have no idea what they believed they might achieve by this. I’m going to have to detonate them in space.”

He explained to Oli that he and the drone would survive the blast with their force fields, but if the unprotected graviton generator was destroyed this close to Earth, it could quite possibly alter the orbit of the Moon. The warheads were only a few thousand kilometres from the rock, but travelling at sixty thousand kilometres per hour, they would be there in no time. Each warhead had a different detonation code, so Robbie had to fly alongside each one, connect with it and detonate it manually. Oli watched as the sky lit up every few seconds. The first wave of miniscule pieces of shrapnel hit the asteroid throwing up tiny plumes of dust, which gently floated back under the weak gravity. Each explosion was celebrated with a “whoop” from Oli. He’d counted eight detonations when the ship became visible as a tiny pin-sized light moving across the sky. Robbie had only five seconds to detonate the final two warheads and, in a split second of calculation, realised that this was not going to happen. Oli took a deep breath as the ship appeared to grow and two smaller lights appeared either side of it. Robbie was hurtling towards the asteroid with the two warheads, either side of the ship. If he cracked the code to detonate one warhead, then the other would impact the asteroid almost exactly where Oli was standing. The other missile was heading directly for the Graviton Generator. In a split second he

turned left and knocked the warhead spinning passed the asteroid, then a quick flick to the right and he connected with the other one.

Oli saw a flash across the sky as the second warhead, spiralling out of control, missed the surface of the rock by barely fifty metres. He followed the path of the rocket as it span off into space and when he was certain that the danger had passed, he turned to see where Robbie was. He nearly jumped straight out of his shoes as he saw the vertical roof of the ship, barely one metre above the booster station. Oli punched the air, let out a 'whoop' and slapped the roof of the ship, which was within easy reach.

"That was a tad close," said Robbie, as the ship turned to face away from the asteroid and shot off into space again.

"I'll just go and detonate those last two warheads. I don't think we want them orbiting the solar system as a time-delayed greeting for future generations."

Five seconds later, there was an explosion in space, shortly followed by another. Robbie returned to the asteroid and collected Oli and the drone. He then took the ship a couple of hundred kilometres away. Oli was watching the screen and he could see a bright pulsing light on the surface of the asteroid, as the Graviton Generator sparked into life.

"There," said Robbie, "the asteroid is now weightless; we can dispose of it as we wish. I was thinking that the easiest solution would be to lob it into the sun."

"I've had a better idea," said Oli. "Is it too big to put into a stable orbit around the earth? You know, like a second moon."

Robbie did a quick calculation of mass to gravity ratio and concluded that it would be able to orbit the earth inside the orbit of the existing moon. Not too close, or it would have an influence on the tides of Earth's oceans. He didn't think that people living near the coast would appreciate that too much.

"We could put it into a stable orbit at 290,000 kilometres from Earth Oli. I'll set its course in the opposite direction to the moon and make the orbit eight percent slower, so that once a year there will be a double full moon. Also," he continued, obviously excited by the prospect, "once every five years, the asteroid will pass in front of the moon, causing a total eclipse."

“You really are a bit of an artist at heart, aren’t you?” said Oli.

“I do think that we had better inform the President of our plans,” said Robbie. “The rock is about to accelerate towards the planet. It may cause the poor chap to pop a cork.”

Pop a cork? thought Oli. *My boy’s coming along just fine.*

Robbie moved the ship to a position, two hundred metres above the asteroid and connected a towing beam, usually used for towing rubbish barges into the Annenian sun.

*

Doctor Conway was furiously tapping numbers into his computer, trying to ascertain what effect the explosions had on the course of the asteroid. He knew full well that it would still be heading for Earth, but he had to try. The President and all the gathered staff had seen the explosions in space on a screen in the Oval office, cheering with each one in the assumption that it had impacted the rock. The now familiar sound of the President’s phone began to ring as Oli relaxed in the chair with his feet on the console. This was probably not the ideal posture to assume when talking to the Commander-in-Chief of the most powerful nation in the world, but hey, they’d just saved the planet.

“Is that Conway?” barked the president.

“Hello Mr President,” said Oli. “It’s Oli here again.”

“Look,” roared the President, “I don’t know who the hell you are, but you’re on a secure line.”

“Yes I know. Firstly, I want to congratulate you on some really good shooting. I can’t even begin to imagine how you would aim a rocket from Earth to hit such a small target so far away. Very wow.” He didn’t mean to sound patronising, he was genuinely amazed at the genius involved in such a feat.

“How do you know about that?” barked the President.

“One of them nearly landed on my head,” chuckled Oli. “I just wanted to let you know that we’ve got the asteroid and we’re going to tow it into an Earth orbit. I don’t know about you, but I reckon it’ll look really cool as a second moon. If you don’t like it, we can always get rid of it later. It’s about to speed up towards the earth. I just wanted to warn you. Bye for now.”

Robbie hung up the line.

“I guess he’ll have to believe us now,” said Oli.

The ship sped towards Earth with its rather cumbersome passenger close behind. They passed close to the moon and slowed down.

“It's currently a full moon Oli, so we might as well give them the first double full moon tonight.”

Several grids and figures appeared on the screen with the earth and moon connected by an unfathomable set of equations, constantly morphing into even more unfathomable equations. The two grids moved towards each other and rotated with the roll of the ship and as they joined and became one grid, they flashed red at which point the ship turned to follow an orbital path. More figures appeared on the screen, rapidly changing, then began to slow until they ticked by, one every second or so. As the speed of the ship and the position of the asteroid matched Robbie's calculations, the tow was cut and the graviton generator disengaged. The new moon was now free to continue on its mathematically perfect journey for all eternity. The asteroid was now part of the scenery, and Oli couldn't wait to see the night sky over London and admire their handiwork.

The President's phone rang again. This time, it *was* Doctor Conway.

“You're not going to believe this Mr President, but the asteroid just accelerated at close to light speed and is currently in orbit around the earth.”

“Holy cow! He was telling the truth.”

“What did you say?” asked Doctor Conway.

“Ah, nothing Doctor Conway. Nothing. Thank you. I'll call you back.”

*

It was 6pm in Cornwall, and Stephan was making a cup of coffee. The kitchen window of his uncle's cliff-top house had stunning views east across the village and across the undulating scrub land beyond. But this evening there was an unusual addition to the scene. He didn't make anything of it at first, but as he was filling the kettle with water he suddenly realised that there was a light in the sky. The full moon was rising over the hill that he fondly remembered tobogganing down as a child, and the second light was directly in the centre pane of the flaking, old sash window. At first he thought it must have been a reflection in the glass, but as he scrutinised closer, he could see the irregular shape of the object. People all over the world, well the half that was experiencing night at least, were looking

skywards, bamboozled by the new object in the sky. The news stations were quick to pick up on it, and several observatories had already confirmed that it was in fact a second large body in orbit around the earth.

Stephan turned on the television just in time to catch the start of the news. There was a picture of the asteroid and the presenter was interviewing an astronomer called Professor James Farrington. He could confirm the distance and size of the object, but when questioned about its origin, he had to admit that at the moment they were unable to explain the phenomenon.

“Does it pose a threat?” asked the presenter, in the usual annoying manner that journalists always try to find a threat in any story.

“No. It appears to have settled into a stable orbit, travelling in the opposite direction to the Moon.”

Oli was watching the news and was pleased with the outcome. At least no one would be panicking now plus it might give them something else to concentrate on for a while, rather than the usual nonsense.

“Right then Robbie me old mucker,” said Oli, clapping his hands together as though indicating a job well done. “How about teaching me how to fly this tub?”

“Oli, I really don’t think that referring to the ship as a *tub* is going to achieve your desired conclusion.”

Oli and Pardy looked at each other and Oli made his ‘oops’ face. He explained that it was a term of endearment and that he really did love the ship. With that, a previously concealed section of the control panel silently glided out towards him revealing many more controls. This lower control panel was curved to fit around the chair so that Oli was suddenly surrounded by all manner of fun-looking gizmos. Two joysticks popped up on either side of the seat so that they were perfectly positioned for Oli to hold without moving. They looked as though they were made from glass, and Oli felt that if he gripped them too tightly they would surely shatter.

“Well!” exclaimed Oli. “You kept this a secret, didn’t you?”

“I anticipated your Human desire for, shall we say, hands on technology and constructed this human interface before you came on board the ship,” said Robbie. “The left stick controls the speed

and the right one, pitch and yaw.” Robbie explained. “You don’t need to worry about anything else for now. “

Oli was more than familiar with the concept of pitch and yaw.

“If you let go of the left stick,” Robbie continued, “the ship stops dead. They really are quite sensitive, so you only need to make very small movements. The ball on top of the right stick controls the roll. Use this to roll the ship left and right. The scale of the throttle control is set by these ten buttons.” A row of lights just to the right of the throttle lit up in sequence: three blue, three yellow, three black and one red.

“The first button is for flying within an atmosphere and incorporates a throttle range of zero to twenty thousand kilometres per hour. I would greatly appreciate it if it remained on this setting for now.”

Oli turned and gave a little wink to Pardy, who lowered her head into her feathers and giggled. The space in front of the screen lit up with figures and a grid, floating in mid-air in front of the screen. They were transparent and allowed Oli to see the screen clearly, but he asked Robbie to remove them since he didn’t have a clue what they meant. Pardy had climbed onto Oli’s shoulder. She was slightly nervous as though she were a passenger in a car with a first-time learner driver, but Robbie had assured them both that if Oli screwed up, he would step in and take over. He also assured them that his reactions, even after such a long time, were sufficient.

Oh, so he’s swearing now, thought Oli. He’ll be smoking next, and then I suppose he’ll get into designer drugs and grow long hair.

Oli gripped the two joysticks. They were five thousand kilometres from Earth so there wasn’t really anything to hit. He edged the throttle stick forward gently...Nothing. He’d actually accelerated to 800 kilometres per hour, but there was no sensation of movement. He pushed it a bit further and then decided to try the right stick. He moved it to the left and the earth appeared, flying in from the left of the screen to fill the whole screen. Oli panicked and let go of both sticks.

“Do not fret Oli. Even at maximum velocity on the first setting it’ll take us fifteen minutes to reach the earth from here.” Then in a very quiet voice, he added, “I’m not an idiot.”

Oli locked his fingers together and pushed them away from him in the manner that a concert pianist might do before attempting to get to grips with a Rachmaninoff concerto. He grabbed the sticks again. This time he pushed the throttle all the way forward, waited a few seconds and gently moved the right stick to the right. The earth disappeared from the left of the screen and the stars began streaming across. Pardy let out a little high pitched “whee.” A three-dimensional hollow image of a sphere appeared to the left of the screen with a flashing red arrow next to it. This, Robbie explained, showed him where he was in relation to the nearest large astronomical body. As he continued to turn, the holographic image of the earth appeared from the side of the screen and moved around behind him, floating through the control room.

“Cool.”

He kept the stick slightly to the right and in a few seconds, the earth appeared from the right of the screen. When it was centred, Oli straightened the right stick and it stayed in the middle of the screen.

“Can I have a speedo in kilometres per hour please Robbie?” Oli asked. A red transparent 20,000 appeared at the bottom centre of the screen. “Ta,” he said, not taking his eyes from the screen. He moved the right stick until the earth was in the left corner of the screen and hit the second blue button. The speedometer instantly changed to 50,000, and the earth began to rotate. As it moved out of the screen, Oli would move the right stick to bring it back until he found the angle to keep the planet in the same position. He hit the next blue button and the figures on the screen jumped to 150,000 and a barely audible “ugh,” came from all around. Oli could feel Pardy’s claws digging into his shoulder. The earth was now rotating at a fair speed and he had to make constant adjustments with the right stick to keep it in the same position. He put his thumb on the roll control and moved it to the right. The earth disappeared out of the bottom left of the screen and a holographic version of it appeared under the consul. He straightened the steering and pushed the stick forward. The earth appeared again, this time at the bottom of the screen.

“Fantastic!” he said, feeling that he was truly getting the hang of it.

Pardy was itching to join in and had climbed down his arm and was intently eyeing the line of buttons. Yellow was after all her favourite colour, so she decided to go for the first yellow button.

Just at that moment, Oli had decided to head straight towards Earth, to see how long it took to get there at this speed. He pitched the nose down so that the planet was directly in the centre of the screen. As though someone had flicked a switch, one second the screen was filled with the blue, white and green of the earth, the next second there was just green. Oli let go of the joysticks and let out a yelp. As he looked at the green screen he could make out a shimmering movement.

“What's that?” he quizzed.

“We jumped to sub-light and are currently two metres above a large redwood tree in southern Canada,” answered Robbie, not a hint of panic in his voice. “Fortunately, someone was paying attention.”

“Pardy!” Oli grinned as he noticed her standing next to the buttons, with a parrot version of sheepish spread across her face. He lifted her back to his shoulder and suggested that maybe she should leave the driving to him in future. Robbie straightened the ship up. They were in the middle of a forest that stretched to the horizon in all directions.

“It's a pity we don't have any music,” said Oli.

“I have files of every piece of music that's ever been put on the web Oli,” said Robbie. “What would you like to hear?”

Oli's taste in music was legendary amongst his friends. His musical palate could never be described as genre-specific. It all depended on his mood and the activity in which he was engaged. One minute he could be listening to banging trance and the next, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.

“I think maybe some heavy rock would suit the moment,” Oli said. “Ahm... AC/DC!”

Suddenly the control room was filled with the enamel-chipping sound of Angus Young's guitar. Oli recognised it immediately.

“Highway to Hell,” he grinned. “Good choice.”

He asked Robbie to turn it up to the required deafening level and felt Pardy's claw begin to tap on his shoulder. *Ah* he thought, another convert. He flicked the speed back to the first blue button and eased the throttle forward. They flew out of Canada and down into the USA. Robbie was trying to jam the multitude of radar signals, but it was impossible to block them all. It was one of the busiest hours

ever for NUFORC, the National UFO Reporting Centre. Robbie actually congratulated Oli on his handling of the ship. He flew down the Grand Canyon at 2000 kilometres per hour and Robbie only had to step in twice to stop them from hitting the cliffs and being smashed into a million pieces. Oli was having the time of his life. He had dreamt about doing this for years, usually when he was asleep, but quite often also, when he was awake. Pardy was enjoying the music and Robbie had obviously acquired some of Oli's musical taste because he'd assembled the drone, which was now performing a fairly passable air guitar at the back of the control room.

"I want to go out over the ocean," said Oli, pulling lightly on the stick to move them out of the canyon. "Which way to the Pacific?"

A floating three-dimensional compass appeared on the screen with a flashing red number 270 to the right of it. Oli turned the stick to the right and the flashing red number moved around the compass. When it reached the top, it stopped flashing. Oli straightened up the ship and accelerated to five thousand kilometres per hour.

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"What do you mean, Mach 4?" asked Major Jack Greenham, peering over the shoulder of the Operations Specialist, who was operating the tracking system. The top secret tracking centre had been built in the heart of Mount Union in Arizona to track all air traffic moving through United States airspace. The state-of-the-art equipment could pinpoint a child flying a radio-controlled plane, from Maine to San Diego.

"That's five thousand kilometres per hour, Corporal. Nothing moves at that speed inside the atmosphere. You must be mistaken. Run a diagnostic."

He waited, cupping his chin in his hand and tapping the side of his cheek whilst changing the acoustics of his mouth in a way that always irritated the hell out of everyone around him. The Operations Specialist, desperately trying to block out the infuriating sound behind him, ran another diagnostic, his eyes transfixed on the screen.

"The signal is confirmed sir. There is no system error. We have an unidentified bogey on a heading of one-eight-zero moving at Mach 4 at a height of four hundred metres."

“Where is it exactly?” asked the Major.

“It’s just left Utah and... Hold on a minute. It’s slowed to Mach 2 and has entered the Grand Canyon sir.”

The major reached over to the next desk and pulled a red telephone receiver from the front of the panel. He pushed one button and waited.

“This is Major Greenham. We have an unidentified bogey travelling at Mach 2, in...I repeat *in* the Grand Canyon.” He held his hand over the mouthpiece. “Where is it now, Corporal?”

“It’s just left the Canyon, increased to Mach 4 and changed course to two-seven-zero. ETA, Pacific coast, three minutes.”

The major relayed the information to the National Defence Centre in Washington and was ordered to continue tracking the object. There was very little else they *could* do, after all. They had nothing fast enough to intercept it and they certainly had nothing fast enough to shoot it down. Two hundred kilometres off the coast of Mexico however, the USS Port Royal, a Ticonderoga class cruiser was taking part in an exercise, the object of which was to detect and engage the USS Santa Fe, a Los Angeles class fast attack submarine.

“Priority one message coming through Captain,” said the Communications Officer.

Commander Willis took the printed text and read it silently; ‘Unidentified bogey...position 35 degrees 42 minutes north...114 degrees 02 minutes west...course 270 degrees...speed Mach 4...engage and destroy’.

“Battle stations,” he calmly stated. “This is not a drill.”

The ship was armed with Sea Sparrow missiles that could reach Mach 4 plus. So they had a fair chance of hitting the object. A giant plume of smoke and fire burst from the rear of the ship, and out of it emerged the missile. Oli was flying so close to the sea that a trail of spray forty metres high was shooting up behind the ship. Robbie put a rear view on the screen to show Oli the effect they were having.

“Cool,” he said, edging the ship even closer to the ocean. “You will let me know if there’re any boats coming up, won’t you Robbie? I don’t think they’d appreciate being carved in two.”

“The closest vessel is a United States Cruiser about forty kilo metres from us but we will not... Hold on a minute, they’ve just launched a missile at us. Cheeky buggers!”

“The weapon has locked onto the target, sir,” said the Weapons Officer in the Operations Room on board the *USS Port Royal*. “Impact in twenty five seconds... Twenty... Fifteen... Ten... Five, four, three, two, one... Impact sir. The weapon has detonated and the target is dest...”

“Correction, target still approaching sir. It will pass over us in ten seconds.”

The Captain ran out of the Operations Room and onto the small round lookout protruding from the bridge of the ship, just in time to see a forty metre high wall of water cut across the bow of the ship. The cruiser was travelling at thirty knots and it pushed straight through the curtain of water as it hung at its zenith in the air. The front half of the ship all the way up to the windows on the bridge was hit by a wall of seawater.

The Captain reappeared from his observation point, dripping wet from head to toe, confused and to some extent, livid. The bridge crew, eyes remaining fixed to their screens, fought with all their might, the urge to laugh. Several shoulders began to wobble.

Oli pulled back on the right stick, grinning so widely that he thought he might split his face open and in a couple of seconds they were back in space. He let go of the controls and they slid back into the front of the control panel. Robbie had remote-detonated the missile when it was just twenty metres from the ship. Any normal aircraft would have been ripped apart by the blast, but they would have felt more of a jolt, travelling in a car that ran over a pebble in the road.

“You see what I mean Robbie,” he said, unable to hide the disappointment on his face. “Imagine what they’d be like if they had all of these toys to play with.” Not wanting to let the trigger-happy Yanks put the mockers on it all, he continued. “Anyway, that was superb Robbie. Do I get my driving licence?”

“Yes Oli, you performed adequately. I only had to prevent us from being smashed into tiny atoms and the earth being knocked off its axis by a graviton particle explosion on four occasions. Bravo.”

Oli looked at Pardy and pulled his snooty face.

“Right,” pronounced Oli. “It's Saturday night and I don't know about anyone else, but I would kind of like to let my hair down a step or two.”

“Meaning?” inquired Robbie.

“I'm going clubbing!”

CHAPTER 6

OOPS

It was Saturday night and the usual posse were preparing to hit the streets of London for a night of music, dance and general hedonism. Ed looked out of the window of his third floor Fulham flat at the two full moons. No one knew what it was or how it had arrived, but they didn't need much of an excuse for a party and everyone was going to celebrate in style. The clubs of London had been quick to publicise the Twin Moon Party, or First Ever Double Full Moon Party, so it was fairly obvious that every clubber in London would be out.

Ed, like everyone else in the world except for Oli and the President, was speculating as to its origins, but he totally approved. He wished that his best mate could be there to enjoy it with him, but he'd obviously gone off on one of his famous walkabouts. He'd been expecting him back a few days previously but was wholly nonplussed when he didn't show. Wherever he was, Ed was sure that he would be enjoying the sight.

The plan for the evening was to meet at Covent Garden at 10.30, go for a drink and decide which of the clubs to frequent until the early hours of Sunday morning. The usual crew comprised Ed, the eighteen-year-old surfing guitarist who had been classically trained to play the cello but had decided at the age of twelve, much to the disappointment of his father, that dance music was considerably more fun. Ed and Oli were like chalk and cheese. Ed was always immaculately dressed and would spend more time in the bathroom, preparing for a night out than any of the girls. He was always concerned with other people's opinion of him, whereas Oli never gave this a passing thought. But for all their differences, they complimented one another perfectly. Oli couldn't imagine sharing a flat with anyone else.

Julie, the eighteen-year-old wild daughter of a wealthy car salesman and singer in the band, had been introduced to a privileged way of life. She had spent her school years at the Sacred Heart Catholic School for Girls, where she discovered a deep hatred for nuns, and an even deeper love of all

things hedonistic. Surprisingly, with all her partying and mischief-making, she ended her school days as head girl, acquiring three A's in A Level maths, music and physics. Her father was desperate for her to go to Oxford where she had been accepted to study Maths, but she felt that she needed a year out to decide her true course in life. So far, the year had been spent partying, lying in bed until midday and singing in the band.

Jason, or Jay, was the oldest member of the band. He was twenty years old and described himself as an accountant-cum-bass player, who at weekends, transformed into his alter ego. He was undoubtedly the most responsible amongst them, purely by dint of the fact that he actually had a job.

Sara, the seventeen-year-old fashion consultant-cum-keyboard player, was ordinarily extremely quiet until she walked onto the dance floor of a club, when she became Sara, the Dance Queen of London Town. There were usually five of them, but one was missing and that was Oli, the space-travelling, asteroid-stopping, surfing drummer.

Ed left the flat and headed for Fulham Broadway tube station. He was one of the few people in London who actually enjoyed using the tube. Instead of sitting silently, desperately avoiding eye contact with the person opposite, he would actually strike up a conversation with them. He'd met so many people that way. He'd also been ignored, abused and even threatened, but he felt it was worth the failures to enjoy the successes. In fact, he'd met Jay on the tube, returning from a club at 7 o'clock one Sunday morning two years before. The others had all met up at the Reading Festival the same year and had decided to form the band. They'd never been clubbing without each other since. Oli, everyone had agreed, had just arrived somehow. Nobody, not even Oli, could remember when or where.

The train was fairly empty for a Saturday night. Sitting next to Ed was an old lady with her little Terrier dog on her lap.

"I didn't think you were allowed to bring dogs on the tube," enquired Ed politely.

"Well, you're not really," she replied, "but screw them, I say. I've paid the exorbitant fee for a ticket and I'll take my little Pugsy wherever I like."

Ed shook her hand.

“And where might you be going tonight dear?” she asked.

“Clubbing with my friends,” Ed replied, a huge grin on his face.

“That’ll be nice dear. I hope you don’t go taking any of that nasty B though.”

“No, I can assure you, I’ll not touch a drop of B.” Ed smiled.

What a sweet little old lady. He wanted to take her to meet the others, but she got off at Knightsbridge, where she said she had a small flat. *Nice, and loaded*, he thought.

The band rendezvoused outside the Rock Garden at 10.30. They usually met outside that club but had never entered. Every time they gathered there they could hear dreadful music coming from within, so had decided never to venture inside. They went for a drink and chose the venue for the night. They were preparing to leave when Julie’s mobile rang.

“Hello,” she said. Everyone else threw her an expectant look. There was a slight pause.

“Hey everyone, its Oli! He’s in town and he wants to come clubbing tonight!”

A unison cheer of approval erupted and she told him that they would be in The Source, a fairly new club in which the band had played on two occasions. Oli told her that he would be a while yet, as they had to find somewhere to park, so they agreed to meet him inside.

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“I just wish you could both come with me,” Oli said, with his bottom lip puffed out to twice its normal size.

“Well I could,” said Robbie, obviously aching to hear some more music.

“How exactly?” asked Pardy.

“The drone is able to synthesise human form. It’s simply more efficient to form a blank humanoid shape. How do you think that I interacted with humanity, offering the assistance that they required? You didn’t really believe that Einstein was Human did you? Or for that matter Pythagoras, Galileo or Newton. To be honest with you, I was getting a bit bored, waiting for you lot to work everything out.”

“Excellent.” said Oli. “And what shape would you like to assume to sample the joys of clubbing?”

“I don’t really know. What would you suggest?”

“Well, I think you should be a beautiful redhead,” said Oli, his eyes gazing up at the ceiling trying to imagine the girl of his dreams. “About five foot eight tall, curvy, not skinny, long flowing red hair and a soft southern Irish accent, dressed in a mini skirt and crop top.” He sighed at the thought, then gathered himself together and continued, “But really, it’s up to you.”

Oli swung the chair round to face the doorway where the drone usually appeared. The black mist crept across the floor and began to form a mound. The shape of the body formed first, a blank humanoid form as he’d seen before only taller, with a considerably more appealing shape. Then slowly from the feet up, the drone began to change colour. It grew high-heeled red shoes, then the most perfect pair of legs that Oli had ever seen. They seemed to go up and up, slowly changing colour until at last a tiny skirt began to form. Oli’s eyes followed the transformation, pausing for a few seconds just below the chin. Then her perfect face was formed with a bald head. Just as Oli was about to remind Robbie about the red hair, it started sprouting all over her perfectly rounded scalp, like playdough being forced through a sieve. Oli stared, open-mouthed at the vision that had appeared before him. Just then, the figure shifted her weight onto one foot thus pushing the opposite hip out and in a silky southern Irish lilt said, “how’s that?”

Oli was seriously doubting whether he would ever be able to talk to Robbie again. She was perfect, but he knew that he was talking to Robbie, who was most definitely a bloke. This was going to require some concentration.

“Wow! But you should definitely rethink the shoes. If you try and dance in those, your feet are going to be killing you by... what am I talking about? You’re a drone. It’s perfect! Now, how are we going to get into London without anyone seeing us, er... Roberta?”

Robbie explained how he would enter the North Sea well out of eyesight of land, travel up the River Thames underwater, and park the ship on the bottom of the river where they could walk ashore using the Go-ring. They headed for Earth and three minutes later were below the surface of the North Sea, surging towards the coast at close to three hundred kilometres an hour. They snaked their way up the river at a considerably slower pace so as not to make ripples, and came to rest below Embankment tube station.

“I’m sorry Pardy, but you’re going to have to stay here. They don’t let parrots into clubs. You can guard the ship while we’re gone.”

“Actually I am a bit tired after all the excitement of the last few days. I will enjoy the chance to rest. You go and have fun.”

Oli quickly downloaded eight hours sleep from the NFS and joined Roberta in the cargo hold, consciously averting his eyes from her legs. The door in the ceiling opened, revealing the murky water of the Thames, held aloft by a force field. Then the platform lifted them out of the ship and onto the roof. He had to feel each footstep gently as he went, because he couldn’t see more than one metre through the brown, murky water. He reached the edge of the ship and spotted the rusty iron ladder that Robbie had cleverly parked next to. With a single bound he glided across the gap and grasped hold of the rusty rung. He climbed the ladder and carefully peered through the surface water to make sure that nobody was watching. He spotted an amorous couple leaning over the wall of The Embankment. Oli could see that they were entwined in a lover’s grip and resisted the temptation to climb out of the water fully dressed and totally dry. He felt although this would be extremely funny, it would probably ruin the moment for them. After a few minutes, they continued on their way and he climbed the ladder to the gap in the wall. He had to be extra careful because some idiot had put a second moon in the sky and it was the brightest night that he’d ever seen.

Roberta daintily stepped off the ladder and Oli saw a rippling movement surge from her head to her little red shoes. Roberta explained in her melodious tone that this was a way of shaking off the water, like a dog shaking itself dry. Oli reckoned that she could say ‘poo bum potty pants’ and it would sound sexy.

As they walked across the street to Embankment tube station, he gave the ring a little tap and the force field disengaged. It wouldn’t be a good idea to go bumping into people on the tube and sending them flying.

“Why is everyone staring at us Oli?” asked Roberta.

“If you look closer,” said Oli, “you’ll notice that only the men are staring and they’re not staring at us, they’re staring at you. I’m sure you can figure it out.”

Oli was actually enjoying the attention. He'd never walked through the streets of London with such a beauty before, even if she was a drone.

"Holy oly!" said Oli, stopping suddenly and striking his forehead with the palm of his hand. "We haven't got any money. How in the name of all that's believable are we going to get into a club with no money?"

The usual scenario for a Saturday night out was that Oli never had any money so apart from the gorgeous fictitious model, the invincibility ring and his space ship parked in the Thames, it was just another night out.

"I believe you have cash dispensing machines," said Roberta. "Why don't we get some from one of those?"

"Great idea, but I don't have a card," replied Oli.

"No problem Oli, I can use mine." She looked sideways at Oli and gave a mischievous smile.

"Roberta?" Oli looked at her suspiciously. "Are you talking about stealing money from a bank?"

"Well Oli, in view of the fact that we've just saved the planet from certain destruction, I think they can spare us a few quid for a night out."

Oli thought about how he'd been refused a loan to buy his new drum kit last year and how they charged him twenty five pounds to send him a letter to tell him that he was thirty pounds overdrawn. He paused to moralise over Roberta's logic, nodded his approval and they headed for the nearest bank. They found a cash machine and Roberta placed her hand against the card slot while Oli nervously looked over his shoulder. Her index finger dissolved into the slot and the screen flashed.

"How much would you like to withdraw?" Roberta asked.

The temptation to enter a five figure number was almost irresistible, but Oli was essentially an honest fellow and he entered the figure of a hundred and fifty pounds. That would pay him back for the letter and give them a good night out. The cash appeared, shortly followed by Roberta's index finger. "Now that's really sticking one up at the banks," said Oli.

They got to the club and as it was past 1 am, there was no queue. The towering Godzilla of a doorman was staring so intently at Roberta, that he didn't even notice Oli.

“Ahem,” coughed Oli, causing the doorman to glance to his right where Oli was looking up at him.

“Oh hi Oli,” said Geoff, “how’s it going? Are you...” he pointed his finger between Oli and Roberta, unable to hide his surprise, “together?”

“Hi Geoff. Yes, this is Roberta, she’s a friend from out of town.”

The doorman, obviously in a state of shock, moved to one side and held out a hand, offering them entrance. As Oli passed him, he felt a pat on the back and turned to give Geoff a cheeky wink.

They could hear the dull thud of the bass drum coming from within and Oli’s heart gave a little flutter of excitement. Inside, the music was pounding and there were people jumping around like lunatics. There must have been five hundred people in the place. *Now for the tricky part about meeting people inside a club*, he thought; finding them.

Ed, Julie, Jay and Sara were fully implanted in their usual clubbing position; at the front, in the middle of the action. Ed, being six foot two, was the first to spot Oli pushing his way through the crowd on the stairs leading down to the dance floor. But who was that following him? No, surely not. There was no way that she was *with* him. She must be just following him, and as soon as they reached the dance floor she would branch off in the other direction to her waiting Adonis of a boyfriend. They reached the bottom of the stairs and after scanning the heaving sea of heads a few times, Oli saw Ed and waved excitedly. He started delicately pushing his way through the shoulder-to-shoulder people, frequently raising himself to his tip toes to spot Ed. *She’s still following him*, thought Ed, gaining in confusion with every step. Ed started to look around for a likely partner to the goddess. Nothing. No one that even came close to being a worthy partner, except for himself of course. As Oli got to within three metres of them, it became painfully clear to Ed that somehow, by some freak of nature, Oli had come clubbing with the most gorgeous girl that he’d ever laid eyes upon. Oli put his arms out to give Ed a big greeting hug and as Ed’s head was resting above Oli’s, he got a close up view of the girl of his dreams.

“How’s it going?” Oli shouted.

“Great. Who is that?”

“Just a friend. She’s from Ireland.” Oli gave Julie, Jay and Sara a big, ‘haven’t-seen-you-for-ages’ hug all together in true club-land style. Nobody was really paying any attention to Oli’s greeting, they were all fixated on Roberta and the same short conversation took place a further three times. It was impossible to communicate with more than one person at a time because he had to shout directly into the person’s ear in order to be heard. Oli grabbed Roberta’s hand and reeled slightly as he realised that it felt like real skin. He pulled her into the middle of the group. She gave a little girlie wave and a smile that would have melted Glurk. Robbie had definitely been watching too many Australian soaps, but it was working for Oli. *She’s a drone, she’s a drone, she’s a drone*, he repeated in his mind.

Unable to hold anything resembling a decent conversation, almost in unison they began to wave their arms in the air and leap about like mad fools. Roberta watched how it was done and joined in. Every guy on the dancefloor was catching a sneaky look at Roberta. Even some of the women were glued to her every gyrating move. Oli began to think that maybe he should have toned it down a bit, after all, they weren’t meant to be drawing any attention to themselves. *Oh well*, he thought, *it’s done now. Might as well enjoy the moment.*

Two hours of solid dancing elapsed and Ed lent over to Oli’s ear and shouted, “let’s go get a drink!” Oli nodded and made the *going to get a drink* sign to everyone. Julie and Sara had their eyes closed and were lost in another world. Oli knew from past experience that it was best to leave them alone, so he grabbed Roberta’s arm and followed Ed and Jay to the bar. They had already composed a cover story to explain where he’d been for two weeks. He’d been travelling around Egypt, had changed his flight and met Roberta on the plane back to England. He was going with her to Ireland for a couple of weeks and would be back soon. But in the quieter bar area, Ed and Jay weren’t interested in Oli’s version of events. Their interest was fully reserved for Roberta. She gave them the same story and they both scrutinised every word as it formed in her perfect mouth. Oli thought, *they definitely should have toned it down a bit.*

“You have my permission to marry her,” said Jay.

“You have my permission to dump her so I can marry her,” said Ed.

Ed and Jay enjoyed a beer while Roberta, who was totally into the music, jiggled about in front of them. Another two hours passed and Roberta was propositioned more times than any other nano-drone-Human-facsimile in history. Eventually, the final tune finished and the lights came on, politely informing everyone that it was 6.30 a.m. and the time had come to drag their sweaty bodies back to their homes. Sara was still dancing around with her eyes closed, moving in perfect harmony with the sound of silence. Julie gave her a tap on the shoulder and she jumped as she opened her eyes.

“Time to go home hun,” said Julie. Sara puffed out her bottom lip, disappointed that a great night of dancing had come to an abrupt end. Julie gave her a big hug and they went off to get their coats.

“Everyone’s coming back to ours Oli. You coming?” asked Ed.

“Ah...Oli,” the soft Irish voice of Roberta whispered into his ear. “We have a problem.”

Oli guided Roberta away from the others. “What is it?” he enquired

“The tide’s gone out and the ship is sat on the mud in full view of thousands of onlookers.”

“How did that happen? Aren’t you on the ship as well? Didn’t you see it happening? What are we gonna do now?”

The others were watching Oli and Roberta. It was obvious that something was wrong, but what? Was this the first lovers’ tiff? Were they about to break up? And what the hell was she doing with Oli anyway?

“I was enjoying the music,” said Roberta. “It was only when the music stopped and I heard the sound of something touching the outside of the ship, that I twigged. It would appear that they’ve hung straps around the front and rear of the ship and are about to lift it onto a lorry.”

“Can’t you just force your way out and fly away?”

“Yes of course I could, but I would probably take half the crane with me and scatter the area with debris. There are thousands of people around. I can’t risk injuring them.”

“We’ve got to get back there now,” said Oli.

They hurried over to the others, who were staring across the dance floor at them, Julie’s left eyebrow raised in that all-to-familiar questioning stare.

“Sorry guys,” said Oli, quickly thinking of an excuse. “We got the flight time wrong and we’ve got to be at Heathrow in an hour. I’ll give you a bell when I get back.” He gave everyone a big Oli hug and much to the delight of Jason and Ed, so did Roberta. They ran out of the club and headed towards the ship. Oli had to shout at Roberta to slow down. Not only was it extremely rare to see someone in high heels breaking the four-minute mile, but Oli was completely worn out after all that dancing. When they reached the Embankment, they pushed through the massive crowd and reached the police railing that had been erected to block off the area around the crane and flatbed lorry. The ship was just appearing over the top of the wall wrapped in a tarpaulin with two slings attaching it to the arm of the crane. The army chiefs had realised that there was no way of keeping this under wraps, so they had decided to lift it in the light of day and carry it off to the nearest airbase, fifty kilometres north of London.

“I wonder what it is,” came one voice.

“Is it a boat that’s sunk?”

“Why is it covered up? Are there bodies inside?”

The group of people that had gathered, were mainly clubbers who had just completed a night of revelry, and they were not really in any state to understand what was going on. Most of them would probably forget about it within a couple of hours.

Oli watched in despair as they lowered the ship onto the flatbed lorry and, with the straps still attached to the crane, they dragged five huge chains over the top of the tarpaulin and attached them to the lorry. It was going nowhere, not without the lorry anyway. With a convoy of two army vehicles, police cars and motorbikes to clear the roads ahead, they headed off.

“Oops!” said Oli.

“Double oops!” said Roberta, aware that with the departure of the convoy, most of the eyes had turned on her.

“Let’s get out of here Oli. I have a plan.”

As they walked along the Embankment, the twilight of Sunday morning gave a haunting glow to the cold mist hanging over the river. The two moons had departed the night sky and Oli began reminiscing about the morning walks he had taken with girls whom he'd met in clubs.

"Oli? Oli?" said Roberta giving him a little nudge on the second attempt. "Come back Oli. We've got some thinking to do."

"Sorry Robbie," Oli had decided to revert back to the name Robbie. It would distract his mind from all the thoughts he was having about Roberta. "Miles away. What's the plan?"

"Well Oli, the plan was to send the micro-drones outside to plant plasma-charges on the chains, then at an opportune moment, blow the charges and lift off."

"Great plan. What's with the *was*?"

"The *was* Oli, is standing in front of you. I used all the micro-drones to construct Roberta. I can make some more, but it'll take a several hours."

"Gumph!" said Oli stopping to smack the palm of his hand on his forehead.

"Hopefully," said Robbie, "when they reach their destination, they'll have to undo the chains to take the ship off the back of the lorry and then I can lift off. I say hopefully because that plan is reliant on the army being completely incompetent."

They both decided that a captured alien spacecraft was going to be treated with a little more security than an illegally parked car, so they sat on a bench looking out over the river. Plan after plan went through Oli's head. Go to the base with the Go-rings, break in and take the ship by force...No! Lift off with the trailer attached, sod anyone who got in the way...Absolutely not!

"Matter Transform Bubble!" shouted Oli, as a passing couple looked back and muttered something like "bloody clubbers!"

"The ship can pass right through the chains," continued Oli.

"The effect of the Bubble begins one metre from the ship's hull," explained Robbie. "If it worked at the surface, it would transform the ship at the same time."

"But won't it cut straight through the chains that are securing you to the truck?" ask Oli.

“No Oli. The bubble needs a free run around the ship in order to form. If anything is lying within the field it will not form.”

As Oli was looking skyward for inspiration, a pigeon flew out of the mist and settled on the railing surrounding one of the old houseboats that Oli had always dreamt of owning.

“Pardy!” he shouted, jumping to his feet and startling an old man taking his dog for an early morning walk. “Sorry,” he gestured to the old man with his hand over his mouth. “Pardy could go outside the ship,” he continued at a whisper. “When the convoy gets to where it’s going, she can leave the ship, wearing a Go-ring, plant the charges and Bob’s your uncle.”

“Firstly Oli, computers do not generally have any relatives and secondly, we have only one Go-ring, which is currently nowhere near the ship.”

Pardy was fast asleep on her perch, completely unaware of all the excitement.

“Pardy,” whispered Robbie, in a voice similar to that of a young child who had just kicked his football through his grandfather’s greenhouse. “Pardy,” he said a bit louder.

“Yes. I wasn’t asleep. Just dozing,” she said, ruffling her feathers and looking around to remind herself of her unfamiliar surroundings.

“We have a slight problem Pardy and we need your help,” said Robbie.

He relayed the story to Pardy who stood on her perch, silently ingesting the fact that she was aboard an alien ship, on an alien planet, being taken to a base where they would try to get into the ship and subject her to all kinds of examinations and she would probably never see her mother again. Obviously, that was looking on the absolute dark side of the situation, but she always found that if you did that, things could only get better. Oli and Robbie had decided that she was their only hope. She would have to go outside the ship without any protection and fly around, planting charges on the chains. She’d missed out on the night of clubbing and now she had the chance to save the day.

“Yippee!” she squawked, flapping her wings in excitement.

“She wants to do it,” said Robbie.

They didn’t know how long it would take to reach the base, so they caught a cab to Oli and Ed’s flat in Fulham.

“Who is it?” asked Ed, as the buzzer sounded.

“It’s me you knob. Let me in, I’ve lost my key.”

They explained that they’d missed the plane and would have to catch the afternoon flight. Ed, of course was delighted to see Oli, and even more delighted to see Roberta. The chill-out music was playing at a low, early morning volume and the girls were currently tangled together on a Twister mat, whilst Jay spun the needle. As Oli walked through the door, he chuckled at the all-to-familiar sight.

Oli and Ed’s flat was very sparsely furnished. There was a brown leather sofa that was so old and soft that if you sat in it, it was likely to be your final resting place for the remainder of the day, or until you could be hauled out of it by a rescue party. The rest of the living room was dotted with beanbags that surrounded the central feature of an old wooden cable drum that they’d rescued from a local building site. It was painted black and served as a table. The music was provided by a rack of ancient Technics stack equipment lying on the floor in the corner of the room. The floor area around the stereo looked as though a small explosive device had detonated in Ed’s CD collection. He had bought an MP3 player but, being the Luddite that he was, didn’t realise that he would also need a computer to make it work. In the opposite corner of the room, stood Oli and Ed’s beloved surfboards, Oli’s seven foot two Gun and Ed’s eight foot Mini-Mal. The conversation in the room had deteriorated into after-club nonsense. Oli found himself thinking; *ah, sweet, sweet nonsense*. He so loved to talk utter rubbish following a night out and he was a master of it. The topic for the morning was the new moon. Was it a rock, a spaceship or a giant turd from a space-dwelling monster that had been caught short and had decided to snap one off next to Earth?

“No,” interjected Roberta, “it is a two hundred and fifty five kilometre wide asteroid comprising mainly rock, with twenty one percent iron and traces of Nickel. Fairly unremarkable as asteroids go.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as everyone digested this commendable piece of drivel. Oli grimaced at Roberta, waiting for the onslaught of impossible questions. Then after a few seconds Ed reiterated his feelings and everyone laughed.

“I need to talk to you Oli,” said Roberta, raising herself to her feet without the use of her arms.

Oli gestured to the kitchen and they left the room. Sara sniggered, giving a little wink across the room to Julie. Ed looked on jealously and Jason shook his head, his mouth open in disbelief.

*

The army convoy pulled into RAF Northholt, where a hangar had been prepared for their arrival. Several men wearing white coats were pushing pieces of electronic equipment on wheeled trolleys into position and four floodlights on long poles formed a square into which the lorry driver skilfully reversed the trailer. The tractor unit was unhitched and ushered out of the hanger by two armed guards. When the doors were fully shut with the armed guards stationed outside, the tarpaulin was pulled off the ship. One of the men in white coats gave a little whistle as he gazed up at their prize.

Doctor David Branith had been working for the top secret UFO Investigation Department for five years. When he started the job, shortly after completing his PhD in astral physics, specialising in the speed of light, and the potential for faster-than-light travel, he was full of excitement at the thought of being the first to prove the existence of extra-terrestrial life. During his PhD, he postulated that without the ability to break the light barrier, travelling to other star systems was physically impossible. He hadn't actually made any definitive discoveries, but he had presented some interesting equations that substantiated the need for continued experimentation. He firmly believed, given the number of stars in the galaxy and the number of possible planets circling those stars, that there must be other life out there and taking into account the age of the galaxy, some civilisations could be millions of years old. The reality of the task at hand was somewhat different. He'd taken soil samples from possible landing sights, examined thousands of photographs taken by the public and proved that most of them were fakes. He knew that the rest were also fakes, but hadn't been able to prove it. He'd visited crop circles and was convinced that they were the work of very clever vandals and he had begun to seriously doubt the existence of UFOs. Over the last few years, he'd become increasingly despondent and started doubting the merit of his chosen path.

Now what the hell was this? He thought, scratching his receding hairline and looking up at the jet black craft. He walked around the trailer, running his hand over the smooth material and looking for any sign of a door; but there was nothing. The hull was as smooth as glass.

Doctor Branith called his assistant to help him wheel the steps alongside the ship. The steps were usually used for washing the windscreens of large military aircraft, but by chance they were exactly the right height to reach the top of the ship. He climbed the steps and crouched down to look along the smooth rounded top of the ship. *Whoever built this*, he thought, *had technology way beyond anything that we're capable of*. He tried to mask his excitement at the thought of getting inside it and pulling it apart. He was just about to step off the top step onto the ship when one of the technicians called up to him.

“Do you think that’s wise David? I mean, it could lift off with you on top.”

“I think if it were going to lift off, it would have done so by now, don’t you?” he replied, stepping gingerly onto the roof of the ship in the same way that a person would step onto newly formed ice. He went down on his hands and knees, crawling along the vessel, fanning his hands out as he went, trying to locate some evidence of a door. He gave the hull two short taps with his knuckle. There was no reply, although Robbie and Pardy had to contain their appetite for mischief more than ever before.

The door must be on the underside of the hull, thought Doctor Branith. They would have to raise it off the trailer so that he could examine it. The first job however, was to try and make contact with whoever was inside, if in fact anyone was inside. The ship had definitely arrived within the past twelve hours, following the previous low tide. If the ship turned out to be empty, then they had to face the serious dilemma that the owners were running around London. They placed a magnetic limpet speaker on the hull, but it didn’t hold. The material was nonferrous. So they used the suckers to secure it. The computer then broadcast the message that had been recorded for just such an occasion.

“What do they mean?” asked Pardy. “Welcome? I feel about as welcome as a Goaf Pog at a uniting.”

Then they heard a series of electronic blips and squeaks.

“What kind of language is that?” she asked.

“It’s very basic binary code saying exactly the same thing as the message,” replied Robbie. He resisted the temptation to send back a binary code telling them to clear off!

Doctor Branith and his assistants began an inspection of the hull with an electronic magnifying glass on wheels. At one hundred times magnification, after one hour of searching, they found no cracks or joints. It was as though the craft had been carved from a single piece of material. The two steel woven straps, strong enough to lift a passenger jet, finally arrived. They were wrapped around the front and back of the hull as far as they could be pushed. They were secured at the top and extra chains were bolted to four huge steel eyes in the floor. Pardy and Robbie were watching the activity on the control room screen and it became apparent that the cranes had not yet arrived. This was their chance. Pardy could fly out, place the charges on the chains and when they blew, there only remained the hangar doors between them and freedom. The charges were only the size of a peanut, so Pardy could carry them in her claws. She stood on the elevator platform in the cargo bay and was raised to within half a metre of the ceiling. She wasn't frightened, just beside herself with anticipation, just like preparing for a game of wingsphere. Robbie zoomed in on the nametag on Doctor Branith's coat and the next second his mobile phone rang.

"Yes? Branith here."

"Hello Doctor Branith," said Robbie. "This is Warren Colwyn." Doctor Branith knew the Minister of Defence very well and had spoken with him many times before, but Robbie had taken a clip from a BBC interview with the minister and synthesised his voice perfectly.

"David, I need you to clear the hangar immediately. We've had reports of strange radioactive readings at the landing sight. I'm sending down a team of specially equipped men to check it out, but until then I want you to bolt it down and move out."

"We've had no readings of that kind here Warren. Radioactivity was the first thing that we checked."

"Just for half an hour please David. I'm sure there will be no problems, but I want to err on the safe side."

"OK Warren, but half an hour, no longer. I've got the cranes arriving to lift it in forty minutes."

Doctor Branith called the officer in charge and told him to clear his men out. Then he rounded up his colleagues and moved them out of the hangar onto the tarmac runway.

The ceiling of the cargo bay opened and the lift placed Pardy on the roof of the ship. She flew straight to the chain holding the rear of the ship, landed on it and placed the charge in the middle of a link. It felt so good to stretch her wings that she thought she'd do a couple of circuits of the hangar.

"Damn," said Doctor Branith, "I've left my cigarettes on the table in the hanger." And with that, he walked back to the small door on the side of the building and entered. As he crossed the floor, he saw a flash of green above the ship. He turned with such a jolt that his glasses fell off the bridge of his nose and bounced across the floor. He wasn't particularly short sighted, and even without them he could make out the colourful bird flying around the ship. He felt around the cold concrete floor whilst not taking his eyes away from the intruder, eventually finding his glasses and hurriedly replacing them.

"There's a bloody parrot in here!" he shouted to the men outside.

The army sergeant peered through the open door and looked up to where the Doctor was pointing. Pardy had just landed on the front chain and hadn't seen the Doctor.

"Well bugger me," said the Sergeant in a broad Bristol accent, which Pardy heard loud and clear. In fact, so loud and clear that it startled her and she dropped the second charge. It bounced along the top of the ship, almost in slow motion and as she watched with gritted beak it reached the curve at the front of the ship, accelerated and rolled over the edge, plummeting towards the hangar floor. Her immediate thought, apart from *oops*, was; *is it going to go off?* And so she dived for cover behind the ship.

"How the hell did that get in here? I'll get a couple of the lads and we'll catch it."

Realising that the charge wasn't actually going to blow the whole place to high heaven, Pardy who was a bit embarrassed by her fumble, swooped around the front of the ship to retrieve the charge and in full sloop, just off the floor came beak to boot with the rustic sergeant. She let out a squawk and zigzagged around him with the agility of a gazelle or, for that matter, a parrot. The Sergeant made a grab for her but missed by a country mile. Pardy flew around the ship and up into the roof of the hangar, where she could clearly see the Doctor looking up at her and next to him was the Sergeant with his size twelve, Hobnail-clad foot, resting right next to the explosive. Pardy had worked out that

these humans, although very strong, were not particularly agile, so with confidence she flew down and landed on the back of a chair on the other side of the hangar. She turned her back on the two men and pretended to preen herself.

“Oh you are clever,” said Robbie, watching the story unfold with increasing glee.

“You go that way,” said Doctor Branith, gesturing to the left of the ship. “I’ll go this way and we’ll catch it between us.”

They silently crept towards Pardy, staying in the shadows. As they got to within a few metres of her, the Sergeant, who was slightly closer and considerably faster than Doctor Branith, made a dive to grab her. Pardy, who had been watching their transparent approach in the reflection of a window spread her wings and lifted off, arching around the flailing arms of the sergeant and leaving him to crash unceremoniously into the metal-framed chair, sending it skidding noisily, across the floor. She flew around the ship, skimming the floor and with one smooth movement that would have made her school coach proud, grabbed the explosive charge in mid-flight and with barely a flap soared back to the top of the ship. She placed the charge in the middle of the chain and flew back towards the hanger floor, where Doctor Branith was helping the stricken sergeant to his feet.

“Hold on Sergeant,” said Branith, “it’s coming this way. Maybe it’s tame and will come to us of its own free will.”

Pardy landed on the lip of the electronic magnifier, a safe distance from the two men.

“Actually, I’m a *she* and not an *it*, and as for being tame, well call me *it* again and you’ll discover just how tame I really am.” She threw her head back in disgust and flew back to the ship, feeling like Queen Pardy. The two men were left open-mouthed as they watched the parrot land on top of the ship and disappear inside.

“Did you *have* to do that Pardy?” asked Robbie, “we were trying to make a clean getaway.” He couldn’t keep up the pretence for long though. He’d actually nearly blown a circuit through laughing when he witnessed the faces on the two men.

“It? Tame?” squawked Pardy. “I’ve never been so insulted!”

The Sergeant summoned his men and as the first of them entered the hangar, Robbie blew the two charges. The four men jumped and as one, automatically drew their weapons at the double firecracker sound. The chains fell in a heap on the floor and the ship hovered silently, a metre above the trailer. Doctor Branith watched in dismay as it turned on the spot through 180 degrees to face the main doors. The soldiers had positioned themselves in front of the doors and were pointing their rifles at the ship.

“Oh please,” quaked Robbie, his voice trembling with mocked fear, “Don’t shoot. I give up.” Pardy laughed so loud that she had to flap her wings to stay on her perch. Robbie activated the Matter Transform Bubble and slowly raised the ship to the roof of the hangar. As it approached the roof, Doctor Branith could only watch in disbelief as the steel rafters and corrugated sheets disappeared. The hole was growing and taking on the shape of the ship. The sergeant ordered his men to open fire and a volley of rifle bullets bounced off the underside of the ship, ricocheted back to the hangar floor taking out a few of the windows at the rear and completely destroying the incredibly expensive magnifier.

“Stop! You fools!” shouted Dr Branith. “They might shoot back.”

He watched as the ship cleared the hangar and as it left, the roof reformed behind it. He ran out of the hangar and looked up just in time to see it disappear vertically at an inconceivable velocity. He sunk into a slouch and sighed. He’d lost the prize of his life and it had been piloted by a parrot with an attitude. This was a day that he would not forget in a hurry. When he called Warren Colwyn to inform him of their loss, he discovered that Warren had no recollection of their previous conversation.

“Hey! Are you two coming to join the party?” shouted Ed. Oli stuck his head through the serving hatch of the kitchen.

“Sorry guys, just sorting out our travel plans. Be right there.”

Oli was over the moon to hear that the ship was safe. Robbie had decided that it would be best to wait for nightfall to come and pick them up, so they had a whole day to enjoy with the party crew. After a couple of hours, Ed went out to the kitchen and returned with a candle. Everyone knew what was coming. His favourite party trick involved holding his hand over a burning flame for ten seconds

without moving. He secretly coated his hand in a flame resistant gel in the kitchen and the room erupted with fake rounds of applause as he once again dazzled them with his powers of pain control. Oli couldn't resist the temptation and gave the Go-ring a little tap. He reached across the table and placed his hand over the flame. After about ten seconds he started looking around the room and whistling an inane tune, the kind that you might hear coming from a building site on a Friday afternoon. He looked at his watch after twenty seconds and sighed, then started humming the *Countdown* theme tune. He thought he'd better not push the bounds of believability, so he took his hand away and there was a genuine round of cheers from everyone. Everyone that is, except for Ed, who was already in the kitchen, squeezing his tube of gel to check the contents.

As the party continued in London, Robbie took the ship to the far side of the moon to await nightfall. He was also at the party and enjoying every minute.

CHAPTER 7

GRRGHRACKSH

Seven o'clock on Sunday evening and Jay was preparing to leave, as he was the only member of the band who had to work the next day. Roberta had gone to the kitchen to make everyone a cup of tea. The second that she was out of the room, Ed re-established his line of questioning with Oli regarding how he had ended up with the perfect woman. This was about the thousandth time and Oli still couldn't give him an honest answer.

“Don't be jealous mate, she's actually a robot that I made yesterday, just to wind you up.”

Ed roared with laughter at this.

Suddenly Roberta appeared in the doorway and beckoned for Oli to come. Whilst the drone never displayed any kind of emotion, Oli could tell something was wrong.

“I'm afraid I've got some rather disturbing news.”

“Not again! Can we hold off with the bad news for a while?” asked Oli.

“I've been monitoring an energy source emanating from the Annenian system. At first I thought that it was an echo of our own Graviton Generator as we left the planet, but it would appear that there are three separate sources and they are heading this way.”

“Ships?” asked Oli.

“Undoubtedly so Oli. They are traveling at a considerably slower velocity,” she said with a sideways glance down her nose. “About light 110. Whoever they are, they will be here in one month and two days.”

“Any ideas who they might be?” asked Oli.

“I have no idea Oli. No other known species had Graviton technology when the Annenian crew came to Earth and I don't see how anyone could have developed it in such a short time. We must assume the worst and regard them as hostile. They are certainly following our Graviton trail.”

“I don't suppose by any chance you've come tooled up, have you?”

“There is no weaponry on this ship, but the mothership that carried everything from Annenia embraces certain defensive capabilities.”

“I thought you said the Annenians were a peaceful race who hated war?”

“They were Oli, but that doesn’t mean that they hadn’t prepared for an eventual meeting with a race that might harbour a more aggressive mentality.”

“Let’s go get it then.”

“I’ll have to come and get you now and then we can...” Roberta tailed off in mid sentence and leant to one side, staring straight past Oli’s shoulder. There, crammed into the doorway were Ed, Jay, Julie and Sara, staring at Oli and Roberta with ‘tired and confused’ written all over their faces. Ed gave Oli a questioning look with his hands open, palms facing upward as if to say, *explanation please*. Oli never lied to anyone, especially his friends. Anyway, they would know immediately if he was kidding them because it would be written all over his face.

“Okay,” said Oli. “I haven’t been in Egypt for the last two weeks. I’ve been on a spaceship that found me in Egypt. We’ve been to a distant planet called Annenia to pick up parts that we needed to stop that asteroid from hitting the earth.”

Silence...

More silence...

“Yeah right,” smirked Ed. “Try another one. I may have been up all night but really?”

“Show him Roberta,” said Oli.

“Is this a good idea Oli?”

“They’re my friends Robbie. I trust them with my life,” said Oli, looking for a moment more serious than Robbie had yet seen. With that, Roberta slowly morphed into the plain grey drone. Now usually when you’ve been up all night partying and then headed home with a group of friends and continued partying for most of the next day, odd things can happen, but as a general rule, your friend’s new girlfriend doesn’t usually morph into a blank, grey, humanoid shape in front of your eyes. It took about five seconds, but Julie was first to react with a lead-piercing scream. Then, as though connected by an invisible force, everyone in the doorway shuffled backwards into the living room.

“You see,” said Oli, moving into the doorway and chuckling at the sight of his friends lying in a pile on the floor. He explained that he had so much to tell them but it would have to wait because they had a bit of an emergency on their hands. “Robbie, the ship's computer,” he offered by way of an explanation, “has detected three unknown ships heading this way and we've got to go and check them out. So...” he paused, grinning across his face with excitement. “I was wondering if you all might like to come along for the ride.”

Silence...

More silence...

“I knew he couldn't have pulled a girl like that!” exclaimed Ed.

“This is awesome,” said Julie.

“So, what do you reckon? Fancy it?” asked Oli.

“Yeah!” they all shouted in unison and then began helping each other up from the ungraceful tangle.

“I'll have to get the time off work,” said Jay and they all looked at him as if to say, *that's the last thing that should be on your mind right now*. They all had a million questions that they wanted answering immediately, but Oli had to hold up his hand and insist that they go with the flow for a while because they had to work out a plan for getting to the ship. He discussed it with Roberta who had reverted to her more aesthetically pleasing form and they decided that it was too early in the evening to fly the ship into Earls Court. What they needed was a large open space with lots of tree cover.

“Richmond Park!” cried Julie.

They would have to get the tube to Richmond and walk to the middle of the park. Robbie could then find them by locating the drone. So they all marched off to Fulham Broadway Station, bombarding Oli with questions about the Annenians, the ship, his journey through space and so many things. Oli tried to answer all their questions, whispering so that their conversation could not be overheard by all the other tube passengers. One hour later they were in the middle of Richmond Park in a huddle, looking expectantly skywards.

Oli had just begun explaining how the Parrot civilisation had developed on Annenia, when without any warning at all, just twenty metres from their position Robbie brought the ship in, probably a little faster than he had intended, but he was aware that Doctor Branith and his team would be scouring the skies over Britain. The ship just seemed to appear out of nowhere, hovering at head height. Then the legs extended with a clunk, that Oli realised was even louder when experienced from outside the ship. He gave Ed a slightly embarrassed look. A general gasp of amazement was emitted as the ship settled onto the soft dew-soaked grass. Although the ship was as dark as interstellar space, the light from the two moons was giving it an ethereal glow and Oli took a few steps back to admire it. Ed gave him a little nod with his top lip puffed out which immediately translated as *nice ride mate*. The side ramp extended and Roberta looked over her shoulder as she tottered up the ramp whispering, “hurry! We've got to get out of here.” They all scampered up the ramp which closed behind them and the ship hurtled back into space.

By the time they reached the control room, they were floating one hundred meters above Mons Herodotus in the northern hemisphere of the moon. They'd gathered in the control room and Oli was introducing everyone to Robbie and Pardy, who was more excited than it was possible to be.

“Hi Robbie. Hi Pardy.” They all nervously waved in different directions.

The screen was focused on a huge mountain about five kilometres in diameter.

“That's the moon!” exclaimed Sara. “How did we get here so fast?”

“Don't tell me that whole mountain is a ship?” asked Oli.

“I thought this was the ship,” said Ed, getting more confused by the second.

“No Ed.” said Oli. “Well it is obviously *a* ship, but there's a bigger one down there.”

“*Cranus* does not occupy the entire mountain,” said Robbie, “merely the central one kilometre.”

Robbie brought the ship in to hover, just above the top of the mountain and activated the Matter Transform Bubble and they began to descend through the surface of the moon. Two minutes passed as they were all mesmerized by the patterns on the screen and then the display ceased. It was replaced by total blackness. They all tried to focus their tired eyes but came to the conclusion that the screen must be broken. Then Robbie turned on the outside floodlights to reveal a giant cave, one and a half

kilometres long and two hundred metres deep. Filling a large part of the cave was the star transporter, *Cranus*. A general “wow” filled the control room. The ship was massive. Roughly the same shape as the little ship, fat in the middle and tapering to a blunt nose, but the rear was completely different. It didn’t taper away but ended in a sheer cliff the height of a five-storey block of flats. Above this on the superstructure were three large bulges, one on top and one on either side. These housed the much larger and more powerful Graviton drives. To Oli’s delight, the colour of the ship could best be described as British racing green, his favourite colour. If he ever had the money, he would buy an Aston Martin Vanquish in British racing green. He disappeared into Oli World for a while, hammering his Vanquish around the country lanes of Cornwall. The fact that they were looking at the greatest ship ever to be built by the Annenians didn’t deter him from his sojourn into Oli World.

Robbie flew the ship along the length of *Cranus*, fifty metres above the superstructure. As they passed over it, Oli, quickly snapping away from his Aston Martin, noticed that the hull was not perfectly smooth like the little ship, but had irregular lumps and bumps which caused shadows to slither around the hull as the little ship’s lights passed over them. There appeared to be satellite dishes and antennae dotted across the surface. They flew over a large shallow bowl, large enough in which to land twenty little ships. Robbie explained that this was where they held outdoor parties. A force field would enclose the bowl and the Annenians would party hard, embraced by the universe surrounding them. Travelling along the length of *Cranus* was like swimming along the back of a giant whale shark.

They made their way to the front of the giant vessel until they were hovering over an indentation in the surface, just behind the front of the ship. The indentation was exactly the same size and shape as the little ship. They landed in the cup and a dome folded over the ship causing the viewer to black out. Robbie connected himself to the mothership and ran a check of the on-board systems. For the last twelve thousand years, *Cranus* had been dormant with just a few vital systems operating under the power of a backup power source. Robbie didn’t let on, but he was not entirely, one hundred percent certain, that the systems would have withstood the test of time.

“Well, it would seem to have held together rather well,” he said. “Hold your breath, boys and girls. Let’s see if the old tub is going to start.”

Oli turned to Pardy and grinned at Robbie's increasing use of his vernacular. The lights in the control room dimmed for two seconds as they do in a plane when they start the engines. The little ship was actually jump-starting this huge vessel. The lights returned and Robbie let out a little "yeeees!" If he'd had an arm, he would have used it to punch the air.

"I need you to go down to the flight deck Oli. The central computer needs a humanoid life form to authorise activation of the propulsion drives."

"But I'm not an Annenian. Will it still work?"

"Yes Oli. The ship was converted to accept human input, in preparation for the eventual transfer of ownership. You simply have to sit in the command seat and the ship will assign all on-board commands to your voice recognition and DNA."

"Do you mean to tell me that I'm going to be commander of a star ship?"

General looks of concern were passed around the group. As far as Oli was concerned though, this was getting better by the second. Of course Robbie would control the vessel, but he was going to be the Commander. He decided to promote Pardy to the position of first mate. On hearing this, she puffed out her chest, ruffled her feathers and stood to a parrot's version of attention, which involved touching her wingtips behind her back. Being promoted to the first mate on a star ship was just about the most seed-tastic thing to have happened since the day that she scored the winning crap in the end of year dive crap derby at school.

"Oops, sorry," said Oli, looking at Ed, "but Pardy did just rescue the ship."

"No frets mate," said Ed. "Just along for the ride."

They went to the rear cargo bay where the drone was waiting to guide them to the flight deck. They stood in the centre of the room and Oli looked up, anticipating the lift through the roof. But this time they went down. The section of floor descended out of the bottom, completely unconnected to the ship and floated down to the floor of a small room. As he looked up, Oli could see the jet black underside of the ship and still attached by the suction pads, ripped wires bursting lifelessly from the casing, was the limpet speaker.

“That doesn’t look like it’s meant to be there,” he said pointing at the object. The drone looked up and Robbie explained what it was.

“It looks really expensive. We’d better give it back to them when we get a chance,” said Oli.

The drone floated up to the underside of the ship, flicked a switch on the side of the suction pad. The device fell into its waiting hand and it drifted silently into the cargo bay and placed the device in a locker.

They walked to the only door in the room, which *Psst* open as they approached it. Oli laughed as everyone jumped. It was a deeper sort of *Psst*, but still, he had to point out, a little urgent. They walked into a corridor leading through the centre of the ship, passing many doors on both sides of the corridor and Oli was itching to explore this ship in its entirety. The drone continued to the end of the corridor to a waiting lift. They followed the drone into the confined space and a strange rapid clicking sound from the drone caused the doors to close. When the doors opened, Oli’s eyes lit up. This was more like it, a control room that actually looked like a control room.

The room was split into three levels. They had entered on the highest level, where there were several workstations around the edge of the twenty metre wide, semi-circular room, all containing screens that were flickering in anticipation of their instructions. In the centre of the room at the bottom level was a half star-shaped console with a chair positioned between each of the four points and behind that on the middle level was the command position. The command seat had curved consoles on either side, angled into the seating position. Two screens on support brackets projected from the arms of the chair. Every edge of the room was filled with technology, but the furnishings and soft carpet on the floor made it seem like a very hi-tech living room. The consoles were coffee brown in colour with dark grey metal trims framing every section. The carpet was light grey and Sara immediately thought; *shoes off in here then.*

The end of the room where they were standing after exiting the lift was straight, but the remainder of the semi-circular layered space, presented the shape of an amphitheatre. The walls were made from the same material as the small ship and the light that emitted from them had an indiscernible colour to it that seemed to complement all the other colours in the room. Everyone had fanned out around the

top floor of the bridge and Julie ran her hand over one of the consoles and held up a dust-covered finger. “Hey Oli, you should feel right at home here.” she said clapping her hands together and watching the ancient dust float to the floor.

“Sit on the seat in the middle of the room Oli.” Robbie’s voice appeared from the ten metre wide curved screen at the front of the room. “I’ve taken over all systems on the ship, I just need command authorisation and we can get out of here.”

Oli sat in the chair, the others gathered around and Pardy hopped onto one of the screens. As Oli sat down, the screens swung into position over his legs and Pardy nearly fell off. She flapped her wings and did a little dance to keep her balance. The screens lit up with outlines of hands. But the hands only had four fingers each. Oli immediately thought of *The Simpsons* and had to struggle with his head to banish the image of Homer in charge of a star ship. Everyone else was thinking *Oh my god, Homer’s in charge of a star ship*. Oli had no idea that his friends likened him to Homer Simpson. They figured that it was best to keep it that way.

“Place your hands on the screens and say something Oli.”

Why is it, thought Oli, that whenever someone says ‘say something’, you can never think of a single word to say? Out of the thousands of words that everyone has stored in their heads, not a single one wants to offer itself up for selection. He put his hands on the screens and following a blank pause that lasted a week for everyone else in the room said, “halibut.” And with this piece of vocal mastery, all the screens around the room came to life and started flashing symbols and computer graphics. The star-shaped console burst into a supernova of activity. Lights were flashing, and several screens across the desk were self-typing text and symbols. Then Oli heard the Graviton Generators start to throb. The sound was very different to the one on the little ship. It was lower and slower. It pulsed every three seconds and was the best bass sound Oli had ever heard outside of a club. He looked over at Jay. No words were required; they both agreed and nodded approvingly.

“Well how about that then Oli?” Robbie said, with an uncharacteristic air of excitement about his voice, “It started first kick.”

“Nice one Robbie. Now how do we get this mountain off our heads?”

“Unfortunately, the Matter Transform doesn’t work on an object as large as *Cranus*, so we have to blast our way out. There’s a ring of thermo-plasmic charges at the top of the cave. They are designed to blast in one direction only. It’ll remove the top of the mountain and we can fly out.”

“I hope they planted them the right way up,” said Oli, as he and Pardy exchanged concerned looks.

The big screen came on and they were looking directly up at the roof of the cave. A red button started flashing next to Oli’s right hand.

“Would you care to do the honours Oli?” Robbie asked.

Oli thought back to the fireworks that they used to have on Guy Fawkes night. He’d been banned from lighting the fireworks following an ‘incident’ when aged ten, he’d lit a rocket but before lighting it he’d altered the angle of trajectory to send it flying across the neighbour’s back gardens. No harm was done, but poor old Mrs. Evesham at number fifty-four, refused to come out of her house for a whole week. Oli spent that week weeding her garden and sweeping up leaves, which he didn’t mind, because he kind of liked the old lady and she always baked him fresh flapjacks.

His finger hovered over the button for a few seconds. Pardy had folded her wings over her head, as though a few feathers were going to protect her if this all went wide of the mark. But why would it go wrong? So far, the Annenians had demonstrated that they really knew their stuff.

“Are you sure this is safe?” asked Sara, always the cautious one. “I mean, those explosives have been sitting there rotting, for an awfully long time.”

Oli hesitated.

“How far into their forgetfulness had they gone, when they planted these charges Robbie?” he asked, his finger resting just below the red button.

“Some were worse than others,” Robbie replied, “but I’m sure they wouldn’t have messed up something as simple as laying a few explosives, would they?”

Robbie explained that short of picking up some shovels and digging *Cranus* out of the moon, they had no other option. As Oli’s finger slowly crept up the console towards the red button, everyone grimaced and held each other’s hands so tightly that they were in danger of restricting blood flow.

“Here goes nothing.” Oli dropped his index finger onto the button. There was a small flash in the centre of the screen and the roof of the giant cave was suddenly replaced by thousands of stars. There was no falling rubble or rocks hurtling out into space, it simply vaporised one million metric tonnes of moon.

“Holy oly!” exclaimed Ed, in his usual mockery of Oli’s favourite tag, “now that’s some kind of banger!”

The throbbing of the engines increased in frequency by an almost indiscernible amount and the ship lifted off and emerged from the gaping hole that was previously known as Mons Herodotus.

“Oli, I’ve been able to use the more powerful sensors on this ship and I’m afraid I have some very bad news.”

“I thought I asked you to hold off on the bad news,” said Oli.

There was a short period of silence.

“I’m joking Robbie. What’s the bad news?”

“There are definitely three ships heading this way at light ninety seven and I’ve managed to intercept some ship-to-ship transmissions.”

The screen changed from a view of the stars to a full frame image of the ugliest creature Oli had ever seen. Sara and Julie and, for that matter Ed, let out stifled screams. Everyone looked round at Ed, who was coughing into his hand as though clearing a lump in his throat. Nothing was said, but Ed knew that it would not be forgotten in a geological period of time. The creature had green and yellow skin, a huge mouth that occupied a large portion of its head, two jet black eyes which seemed to stare out of the screen and burrow through Oli’s skull and a bald head that was ringed with yellow veins. It was wearing a black and red uniform, adorned with decorations. It was obviously the leader, judging by the cowering individuals in the background. Oli could only see the top half of the leader, but he gathered from the two creatures behind that they were humanoid. They had two legs and two arms, although the arms were much longer and thicker proportionally, than those of a human. The creature was spitting at the screen, making gurgling noises. It sounded like it had a dockyard oyster wedged in its throat.

“I do not know how Oli. It is implausible at best, but what you are looking at here, is a Throgloid.”

Oli gasped. “Throgloid! As in savage beast hell bent on killing, conquering and destruction and very unlikely to ever be bright enough to venture into space?”

“Yes Oli, that’s the one. I have no idea how they have mastered space travel and cracked the light barrier in such a short time, but it would appear none-the-less, that they have. If we let them reach Earth, they will obliterate it and everything on it, just for fun.”

“I’ve seen a picture of this creature in the library,” said Pardy.

Oli and Robbie silently waited for an explanation. Pardy was enjoying the moment of having something to offer and she puffed up her feathers and repositioned herself into a more commanding pose on her computer screen perch.

“They visited our world about three hundred and eighty years ago.”

“They were the other visitors you told us about?” asked Oli. “How come they didn’t destroy everything?”

“Apparently, the parrots of the time didn’t like the look of them, so they hid in the forest and let them go about their business. They were only interested in the contents of the ancient city. They stayed for about five months, loaded lots of things into their ship and left.”

Whilst Pardy was telling her story, Robbie had used an undetectable carrier wave to infiltrate the computer on the Throgloid vessel and was able to extract the whole story.

“Oh I see,” said Robbie.

“What do you see?” they all asked in unison.

“You’ll find a Neural Feed Set in the left arm of your seat Oli. Everyone else can sit around the star console, where you will also find NFS units. Put them on and I will explain.”

Oli clarified the use of the NFS and ensured the crew that they were perfectly safe and that it would not fry their brains. In an instant, they all learned the sequence of events that had brought the Throgloids to the worrying position in space and time that they now occupied.

Eight hundred years ago, the Throglroid home land, Throwgus, was separated into two factions, one on each of the two major continents which occupied opposite sides of the northern hemisphere of the planet. They were sworn to fight each other to the death and had been doing so for most of the previous two thousand years. No one actually knew what it was that they were fighting about, but that no longer mattered; the need outweighed the motive by some considerable amount.

One night on the continent of Gagmazi, the home of the Gami tribe, a ball of fire came from the sky and crashed into a lake. They spent the next two months retrieving the object from its watery grave and discovered that it was an alien spaceship. Whilst they had often contemplated the idea of space travel, it would have detracted too much from their main occupation; that of kicking seven bails out of the Magi tribe. Inside, they found three skeletal remains of strange, puny-looking life forms, all sitting at their stations, their eye sockets fixed blankly on the inactive screen. When the Annenian crew had all suddenly forgotten how to fly the spaceship and for that matter, the name of their home world, the autopilot had continued to fly the ship in one direction. Gradually, they'd forgotten how to get up, then how to breathe, and that's where they had remained. The ship was a very basic model transporter, generally used for ship-to-ship work, or ferrying cargo to a planet's surface. It was equipped with a minor grade drive system that could achieve light 5. The ship's computer was only semi-intelligent and when the control system failed to receive any Annenian input, it shut down the drive and waited...and waited, until the power ran out and it shut itself down. It remained in this dormant state, drifting through space for ten thousand years, when it was caught by the gravitational pull of Throwgus. As it fell through the atmosphere, the emergency power kicked in. This was designed to prevent a wayward ship from crashing into a planet and causing a catastrophic graviton explosion. There was just enough power to find a soft landing and dump the ship into it before the computer completely died.

The Throglroid scientists spent a hundred and forty years attempting to reverse-engineer the technology in the ship, whilst they weren't inventing new and horrific ways of wiping out their enemy. Eventually, they discovered a power source that worked and the ship sprang into life. It then took them a further hundred and fifty years to make it fly and another fifty years to make it land again.

They were hoping to find some super-advanced weapons systems on board, but eventually decided that the only way that they could use the ship to harm the Magi would have been to throw it at them. So they sent a party of ten, out into space to discover the ship's origin. Luckily the navigation system was working so they put the ship on autopilot and spent the next fifteen years arm wrestling each other, and inventing new games of If You Dare. By the time they reached Annenia, there were only four of them left. Fortunately, they were the four scientists and the brightest of the bunch. They found the workshops and the dismantled remains of ships. One of the gutted ships had a store of computer globes containing design plans for D class transporter craft, which the computer on board their ship was able to read. They collected as much hardware as they could carry and began the long journey home. In their quest to return with as much of the technology as was possible, they had stripped the ship of all non-essential items. Unfortunately, this included the back-up food maker. The fitted unit had packed up one year into the journey. When the ship set down on Gagmazi, the reception party found only one set of bones and three sets of clothes.

The ship was a treasure trove of technology. There were designs for weapons, drive units and things that were designed as drive units but were better suited as weapons. They set to work and within five years had completely wiped out the Magi. With the total eradication and indeed consumption of their enemy, the Gami split down the middle and began the lengthy process of attempting dividing the spoils. After three more splits and millions more dead Throgloids, one military leader came up with the radical suggestion that they stop fighting each other, build a ship and embark on a quest to find some aliens to fight. They shot him for coming up with such a stupid idea, but then, following a split second of serious thought, decided that maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. For twenty years, with only a few breaks for in-fighting when they got bored, the Throgloids built a fleet of war ships and headed out into space. They covered their small sector of the galaxy exploring every star system for planets that contained life that could be conquered, but all they found, fortunately, were worlds full of stupid animals that provided no sport whatsoever. They extended the search, split into four groups of three ships each, and headed off in different directions. One group of three battle cruisers commanded by Commander Grrghracksh was patrolling close to the Annenian star system

when Robbie and Oli appeared from the planet and shot off at speeds that the Throgloids could only dream about. The captain, a hugely decorated war hero from the old days, wanted the secrets that were contained in that little ship. He didn't want any of his rival commanders to take the credit, so without informing the rest of the fleet he set course in pursuit of the little ship.

Oli removed the NFS and gave a huge stretch and yawn. He looked down at the star console and his four friends were sound asleep, draped across the chairs that had adjusted their shape to place the crew in a more comfortable position. Jay was snoring away with his feet on the consul.

“Ah,” he sighed, “all partied out, little lambs. Let them sleep for now Robbie. It's a lot to take in.”

Robbie said that the relatively slow velocity at which the Throgloids were travelling, only ninety seven times the speed of light, implied that fortunately they hadn't acquired all the Annenian technology. Anyway, the Annenians had mined the Throgloid sun with six Graviton Inversion Bombs. When detonated, they would cause the star to collapse into a singularity that would suck in all the surrounding planets. Problem solved, except for the minor inconvenience of the three battle cruisers, but Robbie assured Oli that they would present no problems.

“You can't do that!” blasted Oli. Then realising that he might wake the others, he started to talk softly. “You can't wipe out an entire civilisation with one flick of a switch. What if they've changed; you know, become nice?”

“I can assure you Oli, they will not have become *nice*. They're Throgloids. They're horrible.”

“I don't care,” said Oli. “You're not going to wipe them out without first talking to them to see what it is that they want.”

“I can tell you what they want Oli. They want to kill everything that moves, eat it and then kill each other for dessert.”

“I want to go and talk to them,” said Oli in his most assertive voice.

“Very well Oli, you're the boss,” a statement that jolted Oli somewhat, “but I assure you, you are not going to like what you see.”

They departed the moon, narrowly missing the new moon that Robbie strongly denied having overlooked and headed back towards Annenia at the top speed of *Cranus*, which was significantly higher than that of the little ship. It could make the relatively short journey in two and a half days. Oli and Pardy set out to explore the giant ship while the others slept.

The main bulk was taken up by two huge cargo bays, each of which could have held a hundred double-decker buses. They actually contained very little, except the equipment that the Annenians had used to build the pyramids. In the corner of the deck closest to the front of the ship, Oli found a row of motorbikes without wheels. They looked more like jet skis, but there was no water on which to use them. He assumed that they must have been for use on planets with oceans. He gazed into one of the machines and tried to figure out the controls. He started pressing all the buttons on the small control panel and suddenly the machine emitted a soft whining sound and lifted a few centimetres off the deck.

“Hover bikes!” grinned Oli.

He climbed into the fully enclosed pod and located two joysticks, one for each hand. Assuming that they would have the same speed and steering functions as the little ship, he tentatively pushed the left stick forward a fraction. The bike silently moved across the deck and Oli let out a little *whoop*. As he approached the first obstacle, which was an odd-looking bulldozer with huge spiky wheels, he pushed the right stick to the right. To his elation, the bike lent slightly into the corner and turned. *This is easy*, he thought. He spent the next hour riding around the hangar, weaving in and out of the heavy plant and gradually finding the top speed of the bike, which he estimated to be about sixty kilometres per hour. Pardy was enjoying stretching her wings and chasing Oli around the impromptu race track. Finally he headed back to the bike rack and skilfully backed the bike into its parking bay. Pardy landed on his shoulder as he stepped out of the pod, her heavy chest movements revealing her determination to keep up with the bike.

What now? thought Oli, scanning the bay for more toys. He was drawn to the low throbbing noise of the engines and asked Robbie if they could go and have a look at the engine room. Robbie explained that the ship was powered by three Graviton Generators that were housed in sealed

compartments that only the micro-drones could access. If these Generators were ever allowed to leave the confinement of their force fields, they would swallow all space-time for an area of three light years. These were the most powerful drive units that the Annenians had ever built. They tapped into the very fabric of Nulspace from which to draw their power.

“I’ll take that as a no then,” said Oli.

The weapon, that had never been used, but Robbie assured Oli that it would work, directed a highly localised beam of this power at the target. Theoretically, the target would crush itself down to an infinitely dense particle. When it was released from the beam, it would scatter its mass to the four corners of the universe, if in fact the universe had any corners. If it didn’t work, the ship was equipped with a shield of the same variety as Oli’s ring, only much more powerful, so they could always use the bulk of *Cranus* to flatten the Throglod ships.

Oli and Pardy decided to explore the upper decks of the ship, where they stumbled across the armoury. Inside, were rows of rifles, handguns and enough plasma charges to level a planet. But Robbie assured Oli that they had never been used. The Annenians deplored violence, but at the same time they accepted that there were those who thrived on it. So they had figured that it would be prudent to be prepared. Oli took one of the rifles from the rack. It was as light as a child’s toy gun, but its lack of weight was in no way related to its ability to seriously ruin the day of its intended target.

“That’s a plasma rifle Oli,” said Robbie, sensing Oli’s puzzlement. “It possesses sufficient power to stop a Throglod.”

Oli had always deplored guns and he delicately replaced the weapon on the rack. He started thinking about what would happen if the more unpleasant factions of humanity got their hands on these weapons. He was rapidly going off the idea of handing over all the knowledge of the Annenians to the people of Earth. They just weren’t ready for it yet. The desire to make money and their bewildering attachment to various mythical beings would drive people to abuse the new found power. He suddenly felt rather morose. Wanting to share his doubts, he told Robbie that they had to rethink the plan and come up with a way of drip-feeding the knowledge as and when it was appropriate. This

would of course mean that Oli and the crew would be the only humans with access to the ship. It would be a full time job, and Oli had never had one of those before.

Realising that by London time, it was three in the morning, Oli and Pardy decided to call it a night. Robbie directed them to the Captain's cabin, which was more like a suite at the Ritz. Pardy was offered her own room but she didn't want to be alone in this strange environment, so Robbie made her a perch with a view out of the window. Oli asked Robbie to wake him if any of the crew stirred but, as was usual when crashing after a party night, he was certain that would be out of the game for a considerable time yet.

Ed was the first to wake and in his state of semi-consciousness, assumed that he was in his usual position, reclining in his favourite armchair, thinking about the weird dream that he'd just had. The room was dark and he reached out with his left hand, groping for the table lamp next to his sofa. Just then the room gradually lit up by itself.

"*Scream!*" He leapt out of the chair and spun about on his heels, taking in the bridge of *Cranus*.

"It wasn't a dream," he said to himself, not really expecting a reply.

"No it wasn't Ed," said Robbie. "Welcome to *Cranus*."

The lights in the Captain's suite slowly came to life and Oli awoke from a deep restful sleep.

"Is it morning?" he said groggily.

"London time Oli, it's actually midday. *Cranus* time, it's neither morning nor night."

"Too early in the day for smart ass Robbie. At least let me wake up first," yawned Oli.

Oli had a quick matrem, threw on his neatly pressed clothes, woke Pardy from a very pleasant dream about eating a barrel of seeds and headed for the bridge, where he found all his friends, awake and exploring the freshly polished control panels trying to work out what was going on. The bridge was gleaming as though just out of the shipyard on its maiden voyage.

"Morning campers," chirped Oli. Pardy just chirped; she never was much of a morning parrot.

Oli took them out to their quarters, which were right next to his, and showed them how to use the matrem and other facilities. Julie and Sara expressed their uncertainty at the morning biscuit.

They had two days left to waste, so Oli suggested that they embark on a major exploration of *Cranus*. First stop was the cargo bay, where Oli had found the hover bikes. They walked around the cavernous deck designing a racecourse, winding in and out of the various pieces of machinery. Oli suggested, with a knowing wink to Ed, that they give the girls a head start. This was greeted with the expected torrent of abuse from Sara. They all donned gloves and helmets. Whilst the helmets fitted reasonably well, the gloves were a finger short on each hand, so they were tossed back onto the shelf. Robbie instructed the drones to make some human-fitting gloves. Following a brief tutorial on the control functions, they lined up on the start and Robbie counted down from ten. When the horn sounded they all rammed the right stick as far as it would go and the bikes shot off down the first straight. Oli was the only one who fully understood the capability of these machines at going round corners, so he left them standing as they all settled in to the controls. The rider sat reclined in a bucket seat enclosed in a streamlined fairing. The right hand stick, apart from controlling the steering, could be pulled back, causing the bike to climb higher. The bikes could only elevate to about three metres from the ground, but it was very useful when traversing rough ground.

Oli glanced over his shoulder and realising that they were no longer with him, he slowed down to let them catch up. He always believed that a game was more fun with a little close competition. He wasn't even remotely surprised that Julie was the first to catch him because she possessed more competitiveness in her little toe, than all of his male friends grouped together. She considered herself equal in every way to any man, and spent a large part of her life proving the point, whether by sport or intellect. Oli really loved playing games with her because she would get so wound up when she lost. Now she had found a new sport at which to excel and Oli was fully aware that she would strive with her final breath to pass him, which made it all the more fun. As she made her first attempt, he pulled across her and accelerated. Then she cut across the inside and he swerved to cut her off.

“Oi!” she shouted, “get your slow arse out of my way.”

The two of them were having such a battle together that they didn't notice Ed sneaking up behind them. At the top end of the course, lay a large machine that looked like a digger without a shovel. This marked the 180-degree bend leading to the long straight, running down the length of the hangar. Oli

and Julie were fighting to be the first around the bend, when out of nowhere, on the inside of the corner, Ed snuck past them both and floored it down the straight, hotly pursued by two very unhappy friends who had completely forgotten about their own private race and were now fully focused on catching Ed. As they approached the end of the straight, Oli looked over his shoulder and saw Jay and Sara closing on them. *Excellent*, he thought. Game on. They'd planned to have a ten-lap race and Robbie was keeping track of their laps. As they finished the fourth lap, the drone arrived on the start/finish line with a number 4 flashing on its chest. They all laughed out loud at this. The bikes made no noise, apart from the sound of the air rushing past the riders, so they could hear each other clearly. This led to considerable barracking, the likes of which would be more at home on a cricket pitch.

"Is that all you've got?" shouted Ed, as Oli failed to pass him on a bend.

"Maybe if you took it out of reverse?" squealed Julie, grinning from ear to ear.

On lap nine, they'd all mastered the controls of the bikes and were flying round the course. Ed had been in front since he passed Oli and Julie and he was in no mood to relinquish the position. He was weaving all over the course and no one could pass him. Julie was getting more and more irate. She knew that she could go faster than him if he would just get out of the way. Realising that it was now or never, she went for a big pass as they all beaked for the fast chicane. Unfortunately, she clipped the front of Ed's machine as she passed him and her bike skidded sideways into the wedge-shaped ramp of a flatbed hover-trailer. Everyone watched in horror as she slid, completely out of control, up the length of the ramp and became airborne. In what appeared to be slow motion, she parted company with her bike which was spinning in all directions through the air and headed straight for an ugly looking machine with dozens of protrusions pointing in all directions. It looked like a giant porcupine and was used to collect rubbish after the global parties.

Everyone pulled back on their throttles, bringing the bikes to an abrupt halt, and together they shouted; "Julie!"

The fun was at an end, and they were powerless to prevent their friend from being skewered. Sara couldn't watch and turned away. Ed and Oli were in mid-leap from their machines in some worthless

attempt to reach her in time to save her. At that precise moment, Julie stopped dead in mid-flight, hanging unceremoniously upside down just metres from the spiky machine. She was still screaming at the limit of her lungs, her long hair limply falling from her upturned head. Oli and the crew all tilted their heads, confused as to how she was performing this feat. Julie was focusing on the nearest spike that appeared to be frozen in time a few metres from her head. She figured this was what they meant when they said that time appears to slow down when you're facing death. Then she smoothly righted herself, having exhausted the limit of her scream, and gently floated back to the track and landed softly on her feet next to her friends. Everyone looked at her, open mouthed, as though *she* could give a satisfactory explanation.

"Towing beam," stated Robbie, after a few seconds of stunned silence. "I'm no fortune teller, but this was inevitable, so I was ready with that and other safety precautions."

Everyone cheered, dismounted their rides and gave Julie a big hug. She was clearly shaken, so they thought it best to call the race a draw and find a new game to play. Oli suggested that they construct a shooting gallery. They went to the armoury and he handed everyone a plasma rifle. Jay's eyes opened a bit too wide with delight for Oli's liking. Even Sara and Julie were excited about the prospect of shooting something. They never were very girly, which was why Oli liked them so much. Oli watched them all strutting around in commando poses and looked away to where he thought Robbie might be, with his *see-what-I-mean* face.

"And these are my friends. Good people. You see," he whispered. With a tut and a raise of his eyebrows, he said, "Humans."

They went back to the cargo bay. Oli gave the Go-ring a tap and hopped into one of the hover bikes.

"Let's see how good you are then," he said, with a beckoning wave of his finger.

He raced around the cargo bay, in and out of the machinery, as his friends fired green bolts of plasma at him. *This is much more fun than Xbox*, thought Jay, who could quite happily waste an entire day playing shoot-em-up games. In fact, most of Oli's male friends had become completely hooked on this strange virtual world. Occasionally, Oli would turn up at their houses to see them, and they would

be engrossed in some online combat game with other like-minded single lads around the world. He was always amazed at their inability to focus on anything other than the action unfolding on the screen in front of them. He would sit there for a while and then just get up and leave. His sudden disappearance was never questioned, such was their fixation on the make believe world in which they were ensconced. Oli, whilst fully accepting the fun to be had with a game console and a group of mates, preferred pursuing more real-life thrills, and being shot at by a load of close friends, armed with futuristic weaponry was certainly thrilling. Whenever they hit him, the force field around him would flash with a wash of green light like a laser cutting through the smoke in a club, and everyone cheered. Robbie was watching all this fooling around and remembered with a virtual tear in his circuits how the Annenians used to lark about in a similar manner on their way to, and indeed back from parties. He'd definitely chosen well.

The plasma rifles, on their lowest setting couldn't do any real damage to the machinery or the ship; just dent the metal and remove a bit of paint. At one point, Ed found the dial on the side of the rifle that controlled the power. He turned it half way and squeezed the trigger. No change. So he turned it up to full power, pointed the gun at the massive shovel of an earth mover and squeezed the trigger. Still no change. So he assumed that it was broken and carried on blasting the bejesus out of his best mate. In reality, Robbie had disabled the power control on all the rifles because one wayward shot on full power would put a hole in the side of the ship.

After about an hour of shooting Oli, everyone got tired and lowered their rifles, beckoning Oli to come back to them. He'd realised that they were getting a bit tasty with those guns, so he was keeping his distance. He would dart between machines and never give them more than a few seconds of target. As he approached their position, in one swift and perfectly choreographed move, they shouldered their rifles and, from ten metres away, showered him with automatic plasma bursts. With hundreds of direct hits on the bike and his head, the green plasma flashes completely blocked his vision. He knew that they were standing right in front of him, so rather than plough into the crew, he made a sharp turn to the left and careered into a stack of metal container boxes. The boxes went flying, as did Oli. He left the confines of the hover bike in a Superman-style pose and the bike, no longer protected by the Go-

ring, fell apart with a rather impressive display of sparks and electrical arcing. The girls, displaying deep concern for his well-being and a certain amount of guilt for his impending crunch, had lowered their weapons. The boys however, continued to blast Oli as he left the bike and followed his airborne path with a trail of plasma. Oli ended his flight, upside down behind one of the boxes, with his legs above his head, resting against a bulkhead. Sara shouted at the boys who were trying to blast the boxes away to get a good shot at Oli, to cease fire. They immediately obeyed, as they both had sufficient experience of the wrath of Sara. They walked over to the pile of smouldering boxes and the sparking wreck of the hover bike, where they found Oli, guffawing with laughter from his ungraceful, inverted resting place.

“Why didn’t you save *me* with the tractor beam?” he asked.

“You didn’t require saving Oli,” stated Robbie. “You’re wearing a ring.”

“Hmm,” was the only response that Oli could muster.

Ed offered him a hand up and they all headed, arms linked, to the massive two hundred seat restaurant, where they found that a round table had been set up with five chairs and a perch for Pardy. Robbie had prepared a banquet for them, with all kinds of strange-looking food and some Earth dishes too. Pardy’s previous night’s dream came true, with a selection of the finest seeds from across the known galaxy.

“Nice one Robbie,” said Oli. “To what do we owe this treat?”

“I merely wanted to express how agreeable it is to have some fun-loving people around the place again, that’s all. Enjoy!”

Everyone looked at each other, slightly confused. They’d shot the cargo bay to hell and trashed two, probably very expensive hover bikes and were the recipients of zero grief. Without knowing it, they were all thinking the same. *Annenia must have been one fun place to live.* The food was delicious, and the Annenian version of ginger beer that Robbie had provided to wash it down, hit the spot. They spent the whole evening, London time, eating, drinking and laughing until they were fit to burst and had to retire. Before he went to bed, Oli decided to view the known history of the Throgloids. A little light bedtime reading. Robbie was *not* kidding. They were hideous creatures.

Their preferred form of combat was hand-to-hand with a weapon called a Grax. It was a double-edged two metre long sword. The handle also contained a pair of scissors, a screwdriver and a bottle opener for opening the Garg beer to wash down the vanquished foe. Throwgus never suffered from an over-population problem, because apart from the constant murder and warring, it was the duty of every second born son, on his twelfth birthday to butcher his parents and provide a hearty meal for the remaining family members. They had no music, no art, no literature and as far as Oli could see, no fun in any shape or form. He was beginning to regret his decision. But he was resigned to meeting with them and trying to make friends. And with that rather intimidating thought, he hit the hay.

“Night Robbie,” said Oli.

“Night Oli,” said Pardy and Robbie together.

“Night Pardy,” said Oli and Robbie together.

“Night John Boy,” said Robbie. In all his years of absorbing every television channel, *The Waltons* had made the biggest impression on him. The lights slowly dimmed and Oli slipped into a peaceful sleep.

The next day was spent fooling around again. They all went for a walk outside on the top of *Cranus*. They had to hold hands so that the Go-ring would cover them all. They walked the entire length of the ship and sat on the bow, watching the stars slide by. Time just flew by and before they knew it, Robbie was calling them in for their evening meal. He suggested that they all get a good night's sleep because they had a big day ahead of them tomorrow.

*

When they awoke the next morning and entered the bridge, the three Throgloid ships were occupying the entire screen.

“They've found us! Shields up! Or whatever you do.” shouted Oli.

“We're three million kilometres from their current position Oli,” said Robbie, unable to conceal the hint of *stupid boy* within his voice. “They have no idea that we're here. I was waiting for you to wake before making our presence known.”

The Image Refraction System had been developed for use in inter-planetary games of hide and seek, but was now proving very useful indeed.

“Oh that's alright then,” said Oli, ignoring the sniggers from everyone else.

The screen in the control room was filled with a magnified image of the three ships. They were small in comparison to *Cranus*. They could have put all three in one of the cargo bays, but they were bristling with armoury. Every inch of the ship's outer shell was taken up by ominous-looking, long pointy things. They weren't beautifully streamlined like an Annenian ship; the superstructure was the shape of a watermelon. They looked more like big ugly jet black bugs that crawl around the floor of the Brazilian rainforest, looking for an unsuspecting insect to devour.

Whilst everyone was finishing their breakfast, Robbie brought the ship around behind them and assumed the same course and speed, five hundred metres behind the rear ship. Oli thought that Robbie was either very confident or had big hairy brass circuits.

“I'm going to disengage the IRS so that they can see us.”

Robbie opened a channel to the bridge of the lead ship. The boss Throgloid appeared shocked as he caught his first sight of a Human on his screen. Oli wasn't sure, but he felt in the expression of the Throgloid captain, that he was disgusted by the sight. *Pot-kettle*, thought Oli.

“Hi, er...I'm Oli and I'm a human. I would just like to say hello and it's very nice to meet you.” Oli was smiling his ‘I just want to be your friend’ type of smile. It usually made everyone warm to him immediately, but he could sense that this one was going to be tough. Without warning, the three ships opened fire with barrages of lasers, missiles, some blue stuff that neither Oli nor Robbie could place. Every piece of ordnance bounced harmlessly off the shield surrounding *Cranus*. The screen was lighting up like a millennium eve fireworks' display and everyone whooped and hollered with every new visual effect. The last thing that the Throgloid captain expected to see on the faces of his victims, were looks of elation and this was obviously having an adverse effect on his demeanour. Everyone was glued to the screen as all three Throgloid ships turned around to face *Cranus*. Each ship had three spikes, a third of the length of the ship projecting from the front. They began to arc plasma until a jagged circle of blue light spat and jumped around the front of the ship. This was then directed to a

point on the nose of the ship and Oli held his breath as this impressive-looking display was released in a single flow of energy towards *Cranus*. The screen turned blue as the charge was deflected around the outside, harmlessly into space. Oli and his friends had frequented many clubs and festivals. They had witnessed many spectacular light shows with the very latest laser technology, but this was way beyond anything that they had ever laid eyes on. They were whooping and hollering as the arcs of light bounced around the ship, disappearing into space as a wispy trail that appeared to be alive. When one barrage of light ended, Oli could see that the ships were gearing up to fire again and he stepped towards the screen and raised his hand.

“Look, can you just stop shooting a minute? I just want to talk with you, let’s see if we can become friends.”

Oli could hear the echo of his words coming through the screen. But it wasn’t English, it was slobber gurg. The Throgloids were hearing this strange creature talking to them in fluent Throg. The shooting stopped and the Throgloid captain raised himself up out of his chair with his enormous arms, and strode up to the screen, his eyes fixed on his quarry. Oli thought that if first impressions really did count for anything, then this guy should do something about the green drool swinging from the corner of his mouth.

“I want the ship.” The computer translated the words of the Throgloid Captain in real time. Everyone had to look away from the screen to conceal their laughter, because Robbie had given this giant slobbering monster the voice of an eight-year-old girl. Oli put his hand in front of his face as though he were rubbing his eyes, and at the same time was biting his bottom lip to prevent himself from collapsing in hysterics. It took him a little while to compose himself. He looked over at the others and all of their shoulders were gyrating in stifled laughter. When he felt he could contain his mirth, he turned to face the screen again, fully aware that he was grinning from ear to ear.

“Well, you can’t have it. It’s not yours.” Oli was aware that he had sounded like a Sunday school teacher who was refusing to give back to a naughty boy, the chewing gum he’d stolen from his smaller classmate. With this, the captain drew a short version of the Grax, only about a metre long and sliced off the head of his second in command.

“Eww!” said Oli in disgust. The girls screamed and looked away from the screen. Oli heard the translation of his exclamation in the screen monitor. “Eeeeeaaaawwx.” Pardy had flown off and was hiding behind the central control panel, safe in the knowledge that her ancestors had made the right decision regarding these foul creatures.

“Look, why don’t I come over and we’ll talk about this man to Throgloid over a glass of beer?”

At first, Robbie had doubted the wisdom in this plan, but Oli had convinced him. Obviously the drone would accompany him and Robbie had assured him that it was perfectly capable of looking after itself. Robbie would hold the Throgloid ship in a towing beam, so they couldn’t run off with him inside. At the first sign of trouble, they would get out of there and hightail it back to *Cranus*. The Throgloid captain gurgled something which immediately translated as, “be my guest,” the corner of his mouth curling up into a revolting sneer. He held out both arms in a welcoming way, but the main image to draw Oli’s attention was that of the three Throgloids in the background removing the decapitated corpse.

Oli wanted assurance that the Go-ring would work against anything, so Robbie got the drone to shoot at him with a pulse rifle from three metres away. The pulse rifle could punch a hole through a small moon from five hundred kilometres. He didn’t feel a thing, and all of a sudden was looking forward to the adventure. Everyone gave him a big hug and Sara gave him an extra special kiss on the cheek, which brought a smile to his face. He’d always had a soft spot for Sara but one of his main rules in life explicitly forbade fooling around with friends. He’d seen too many friends fall out over swapping partners. But that was a really lovely peck on the cheek.

A flap opened in the left arm of the command chair and a pair of earplugs appeared.

“Put those in your ears Oli. They’ll translate the slobbering gurgling mess into a discernible language.”

Oli was getting the impression that Robbie really didn’t like these guys, if in fact it was possible for an AI to harbour bad feelings for anyone. Robbie positioned *Cranus* alongside the lead battle cruiser and extended a docking passageway to the airlock. He locked the towing beam to the hull of the Throgloid ship. Oli and the drone walked along the tube to a round door that was at least three metres

in diameter. The door split down the middle and the two halves disappeared into the wall. He thought they either had some really big furniture to move in here, or else these Throgloids were rather large. Oli had never done anything remotely brave before in his life, but he was slowly starting to understand the effect that an invincibility ring and control of the most powerful star ship in the galaxy could have on a guy's confidence. They stepped into the airlock, which closed with a menacing thud behind them. The next door rotated and opened and they were confronted by a group of five Throgloids, all armed with scary looking guns. They *were* big buggers. The tallest one was about two and a half metres tall. He gurgled and it was immediately translated in his earpiece by the voice of Donald Duck as "Follow me." He turned to the drone and asked Robbie to give them a more appropriate voice, because he didn't want to spend the entire meeting stifling laughter. It was only then as he composed himself that Oli noticed the smell. It made him think about walking through Billingsgate fish market at the end of a hot summer's day when there had been an ice shortage. One of the Throgloid guards whispered a gurgle to another, and the translator just picked it up.

"Poo!"

Oli looked at them in disgust as if to say, how the hell can *I* smell worse than Billingsgate? They walked down several dimly lit corridors. They obviously hadn't discovered gargite. The lights in the ceiling gave off a dim glow that could only be described as dirty light. They never saw the sun on Throwgus due to all the smoke and dust kicked into the atmosphere from the centuries of fighting, so their eyes were not accustomed to bright light. Eventually they reached the bridge. The door rolled open and stood there waiting, was the captain with his arms folded and a full length Grax leaning against the wall next to him.

Oli was expecting a shabby looking bridge with badly constructed consoles and no comfortable chairs, the way that all the enemy ships appeared in *Star Trek*. But it was a magnificent-looking bridge. Every wall was covered with gadgets, computer screens and the whole place was decked out in a deep red carpet. He was impressed and immediately congratulated the captain on his outstanding bridge. The crew of the bridge had all halted their tasks and turned to face the Human. He heard sniggers coming from every corner of the room.

“You are very brave, Human. I am Commander Grrghracksh.” Names didn’t translate particularly well.

“Well not really. I just think that it’s preferable to talk face to face.” As he spoke, the drone translated into Throgloid.

“Your ship is obviously very powerful and I want it,” said the Captain.

“Well like I said before, you can’t have it. I’m sorry but that’s the way it has to be. Now you seem like a reasonab...” He stopped. The Captain had picked up his Grax. Oli watched in horror as the massive weapon glinted in the dim light. He obviously spent a considerable time polishing it. Without any question or hesitation, the Captain swung the mighty weapon through the air, bringing it down with all his force onto Oli’s head. As he was completing his swing, the Captain was confused as to why this weak little creature wasn’t making any effort to dodge the blow that would surely slice it in two. I must be really slow as well as puny. Oli closed one eye in a little wince. He knew that the ring could fend off a pulse blast, but this Grax looked rather nasty, but he didn’t back away or cower. He just turned his head slightly and pushed his chin into his neck. With his open eye he saw the broken piece of sword spinning off to the corner of the room where it embedded in the wall. The Captain let out a gurgle as the shock reverberated up through the hilt and into his arm.

Ouch! thought Oli, as he remembered the cold winter sports days at school where he had to play hockey. He hated hockey so much. The act of hitting that rock hard ball would send shock waves through the stick and into his icy fingers, where it would slowly vibrate its way up his arm. He gritted his teeth in sympathy for the captain.

“What kind of trickery is this?” he gurgled, inspecting the jagged remains of his priceless antique Grax. He had taken it in battle from a great Magi warrior, who with his last breath had told Grrghracksh to use the weapon well as it once belonged to the General Argrashank, possibly the most feared of all Throgloid warriors and founder of the Magi tribe. Oli felt sympathy for the Captain as he watched the broken Grax fall from his trembling hand.

“It’s not trickery. I’m just a lot tougher than I look.”

Without any hesitation or thought, the Captain launched his football-sized fist at Oli's face, and Oli heard the crack as three of his eight fingers snapped like twigs.

"Look," said Oli, as the captain cradled his damaged hand and made a sound similar to 'argh!' "Can't we just sit down with a beer and talk about this?"

The Throgloid Captain gestured with his good hand to a door on one side of the bridge. He had to get this impressively powerful foe off the bridge before he humiliated himself in front of the crew. Oli, the drone and the Captain entered the captain's quarters. Ed and the crew panicked when Oli left the bridge because they could no longer see them. Then Robbie switched from the viewer on the bridge of the Throgloid vessel to the view from the drone, and they all breathed a sigh of relief. In the room, Oli found a round jet black table and four high-backed chairs. Filling the walls were photos of battles and the victims of those battles, but the centre spot on the wall was reserved for a shelving unit made from shiny metal and glass. Each shelf had a highly polished skull on it with a banner across the top written in Throgloid. The Captain noticed Oli looking at the skulls and proudly gurgled, "The skulls of the greatest warriors in history and others that I have conquered. Maybe there's room for a Human skull soon." His broad grin revealed a set of razor-sharp, yellow teeth.

They sat at either end of the table and a Throgloid entered with a tray containing two glasses filled with an amber liquid with a white head. Oli felt reassured that beer was a galactic staple diet. He took his glass from the tray and raised it to the Captain.

"Cheers," he said.

The Captain waited for the translation and then gurgled something which translated as, "your head on a stick."

Charming, thought Oli, raising his glass to his mouth and tilting it to sample the ice cold brew. But instead of sliding down his throat, the beer, unable to pass the force field poured down his front and onto the floor.

"Oops, slight drinking problem," said Oli, flicking the liquid onto the floor.

From the corner of the room, Robbie's voice appeared from the drone.

"The ring detected poison and so prevented it from passing."

Oli looked at the captain then at the drink, then he glanced over at the skulls, then he looked over to the drone that was waiting by the door. He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head and sighed, realising that it was pointless trying to reason with the Captain.

“This is getting us nowhere. Look, you can’t come to Earth, you can’t have the ship and if you ever come and bother us again we’re gonna blow up your star along with your planet.”

The Throglroid Captain had stood up and was cradling his broken hand in his other one, looking down at Oli in bewilderment. He let go of the broken hand and with the other reached under the table and pulled out a handgun the size of a wildebeest. Without any warning, he pointed it at Oli’s head and fired. Everyone on *Cranus* gasped. The Captain watched in dismay as the projectile ricocheted from the head of this ludicrously powerful creature and hit one of his prized trophy skulls, shattering it into hundreds of tiny pieces. He roared with anger and the door flew open.

“I mean it,” said Oli. “Robbie wanted to just blow the star without warning and then come and turn you all into the tiniest battle fleet in the universe, but I want to give you a chance. Bugger off back to Throwgus and don’t come back this way again. Oh...and...ah...sorry about your skull...oh, and your hand...and I’m really sorry about your sword.”

Oli waited for the drone to finish the translation and turned to the door. There were two guards who’d burst in when they heard the Captain’s roar, but they stopped in their tracks as the Captain held up his hand to them. *Finally, he’s getting it*, thought Oli. The drone joined Oli’s side and they stepped towards the door. They’d only taken one step when they were halted by an invisible wall. Oli put his hands against the unseen barrier and started feeling for an opening. He quickly discovered that he was confined within a cylindrical force field and as he turned to face the Captain again, he saw him grinning across the width of his enormous head.

“You’re my prisoner now,” he growled. “I might not be able to kill you, but I can keep you here until you agree to give me the ship.”

When Oli was just a grommet at the tender age of six, his mum and dad had taken him on a weekend by the sea in Bournemouth. He was exploring the rock pools when he stumbled upon a small cave at the base of a cliff. It wasn’t really a cave, just a small hole big enough for a small child of

about six to slide in between the two boulders that blocked the entrance. Unfortunately, once inside the hole, he could neither turn around or back out and so he became stuck fast. He was only in there for a few minutes because his screams would have alerted the residents of the local graveyard. He was pulled from the cave by a kind gentleman who calmed him down and delivered him back to his mother. As a consequence of this minor foray into pot holing, Oli hated enclosed spaces. Not to the point where he was afraid of lifts, but if he felt trapped in any confined space he would immediately begin to panic, and even though he couldn't see the walls of his prison, he was aware of how small it was and could feel himself starting to sweat. He turned to look at the drone, hoping for an answer but the drone was busy surveying its surroundings.

“What are we going to do?” cried Sara. “We can't go in there to rescue him without any rings.”

“Leave it to the drone,” Robbie assured her.

Oli was now looking up at the point on the ceiling on which the drone had fixed its gaze. Directly above them was a spotlight the size of a saucer. Oli looked back at the drone to see its head begin to dissolve and drift like smoke towards the light. The very fact that the drone was acting, calmed him down considerably. As the first nano-drones reached the light, Oli heard a smash and shielded his eyes as the tiny fragments of glass showered all around him. He looked back to see a trail of black dots migrating from the remainder of the drone. In a matter of seconds the entire drone had dissolved and disappeared into the ceiling.

The Captain, finally realising that the drone had found a way out of the capture tube, raised his cannon again and started shooting at the ceiling indiscriminately, blowing holes in the structure all around him. His gun suddenly started clicking. *Ha!* thought Oli. *Out of bullets?* But he was concerned about the drone. He didn't know how much punishment the nano-drones could take. He felt sure that some of them would have been destroyed by the gunfire. Everyone in the room was staring at the ceiling in anticipation, when suddenly, through every hole that the Captain had so kindly provided, poured streams of black mist. The mist fell to the floor and gathered in front of the captain who was furiously reloading his gun. No easy task with only one hand. He fumbled and the bullets fell to the floor as the mound of drones began to grow. The Captain fell to his knees, scrambling to pick up the

bullets and forced them into the chamber. He managed to load three bullets and raised the gun towards the drone that had now formed its normal humanoid shape. With one rapid movement that just appeared as a blur to Oli, the drone knocked the gun from the Captain's hand, floated off the floor and grabbed the Captain around the throat. In the same split second, the Captain found himself pushed against the back wall with his huge feet dangling a metre from the floor and the razor-sharp point of a long sword resting against his temple.

“Drop the force field please Captain,” requested the drone in a voice that was so calm that it could have been requesting the wine list in a swanky restaurant. The Captain gurgled something which translated in Oli’s earpiece as exactly the same noise that he’d made. Thinking that the translator had packed up, Oli tapped his ear, but then it dawned on him that the sound of a person being throttled must be the same in every language.

“I think you’re killing him,” Oli suggested.

The drone relaxed its grip slightly and reiterated its command.

“The controls are on the table,” wheezed the Captain.

Without releasing its grip or lowering the sword, the drone floated back to the table with the Captain in tow. There was a control panel at the head of the table and the drone positioned the captain so that he could touch it. Then it tightened its grip again, just to let him know what would happen if he didn’t follow the demand to the letter. He typed in a command and Oli, who had been leaning on the invisible wall with both hands, fell forward and just managed to stop himself face-planting the edge of the table. Everyone on the bridge of *Cranus* cheered.

“We’re going now,” said Oli. “And I mean it! I never want to see you again.”

The drone’s sword morphed back into an arm and, rather than relaxing its grip on the Captain’s throat, it gave a little flick of the wrist. From Oli’s viewpoint it looked like the sort of flick that you would employ to shake water from your fingers before placing them under a hand dryer. The Captain flew across the room and ended up in a heap in the corner.

“Easy tiger,” said Oli, content that he was in the right team.

“Wait!” gasped the Captain, as Oli and the drone were heading through the door. Oli turned and looked at him.

“You’ve defeated me. Aren’t you going to eat me?”

“Eurgh! Thanks all the same, but I’ve been snacking all day and I don’t want to spoil my appetite for dinner,” said Oli.

He turned and retraced his steps to the airlock, followed by the drone. Three more Throglroids who hadn’t heard about the events on the bridge decided to have a pop at Oli on his way back. The Throglroid medical centre had a busy day with broken hands, broken toes and one cracked skull. The airlock door swung open and Oli rejoined *Cranus*, leaving behind him a ship full of very confused barbarians. When they reached the airlock on *Cranus*, the docking tube was withdrawn and Robbie released the tow on the Throglroid ship. Oli looked out of a little round window and saw the Throglroid ships make a U-turn and disappear.

Everyone was waiting for them outside the airlock. They’d seen the whole thing on the screen and as Oli entered the ship, they all gave high fives and hugs and cheered at the tops of their voices.

“Well Oli, they’ve gone for now,” said Robbie, not wanting to interrupt the celebrations, “but I can assure you, they will be back. I still think we should have permanently deleted them.”

Oli had achieved what he’d set out to achieve. He’d frightened them off. They now knew that they were no match for *Cranus*. The problem was solved without a drop of blood or slime being spilt, except of course, for the poor first Officer.

During the journey home, they all decided to explore the rear of the ship. This was the accommodation section of the giant vessel and comprised five decks with cabins, bars, games rooms and everything the crew and passengers would require for a long journey. At the entrance to the accommodation decks there were signs containing strange writing, pointing in all directions. Oli didn’t want to disturb Robbie, who was at this time engaged in a rather tricky game of four-dimensional galactic Larssy, a game that was similar to chess, but utilised thirty billion pieces covering three million planets throughout a single spiral arm of the Milky Way galaxy. The playing area was a simulated version of space-time and the playing pieces could occupy any planet at any

point in time from the Big Bang to the present day. It was Robbie's own invention. He'd never yet managed to win.

Luckily for Oli, each one of the signs had a picture accompanying it so they could get a rough idea of its purpose. One depicted a bed, another a cup and another portrayed something that Oli didn't recognise. It was simply a wavy line with a cross through it. So they decided to follow that one, being neither tired, nor thirsty. They walked down several corridors with Pardy in her usual position on Oli's shoulder and were guided by a sign to take a large service elevator down. There was only one button in the elevator, so Sara pressed it. *Psst*. The doors closed and they began to descend. Down and down they went into what must have been the lowest part of the ship. When the elevator came to a gentle halt, the door flew open again to reveal a large circular room with a desk to one side and several doors leading away from it. Oli walked over to one of the doors and peered through the little round window. Inside were several cylindrical containers on legs. Each one was about two metres in length and half a metre wide. He was expecting the door to *psst* open, but it didn't. So he gave it a little push, but it didn't budge. It appeared to be locked. Alongside the door was a small square glass panel, protruding from the wall and tilted at an angle so that it faced Oli.

"Put your hand on it Oli," said Pardy. She'd seen a similar one in Annenia. Of course, the parrots had never been able to open it, not being in possession of hands. Oli placed his hand on the panel and a green light passed from top to bottom of the screen, like a photocopier. Next thing, *psst*, the door opened. Oli turned to Ed and blew the top of his two fingers, saying, "access *all* areas."

They walked over to the first pod and looked in through the glass top. It was empty, but Oli did notice how incredibly comfortable it appeared. He instinctively reached for a flush-mounted handle situated at the end of the tube and pulled it. The top half of the tube separated into two equal parts. With a gentle hissing sound, the two parts moved out fractionally and then folded around the outside of the cylinder, coming to rest underneath and leaving the open half of the tube accessible. The interior of the tube was constructed from a soft padded material. Oli ran his hand down the inside, closely followed by everyone else. It was padded all around with the softest material they had ever felt. Smoother than silk and softer than down, a combination of velvet with a topping of meringue.

Pardy had flown off to the other side of the room to examine another pod. She landed on the glass top and was staring into the chamber.

“Oli,” she said, beckoning with her wing for Oli to come over. “There’s someone in this one.”

“No way!”

They all rushed across the room except for Julie, who had kicked off her completely impractical shoes and had one leg in the open pod, about to climb in. They peered into the top of the pod, and sure enough, they could just make out the hazy shape of a face. The face was obviously not Human, but similar. The being had no hair but it had two eyes, a nose and a mouth. *In fact*, Oli thought, *a very cute nose and mouth*. There was a sort of mist covering it and in the glow of the lights the figure assumed an angelic appearance. He couldn’t see clearly and he used the sleeve of his denim jacket to clear the mist, only to discover that the moisture was adhered to the inside of the glass. He could make out the shape of the body and it seemed to be clothed in a blue sheet. He immediately remembered the toga party that he’d had for his sixteenth birthday, when they all went to a club wrapped in bed sheets with laurel wreaths on their heads. What a night, and when Julie and Sara decided to swap togas on stage for a bet...

“Erm, Oli,” interrupted Pardy, “I think we’d better tell Robbie about this.”

“Oh yeah. Er...Robbie?”

“Oh Damn and blast,” came Robbie’s reply.

“Sorry buddy; bad timing?”

“You could say that Oli. I just lost half the galaxy to a giant black hole created by flying a ship laden with Graviton Generators into the heart of a star. Anyway, what can I do for you?”

“Did you know that there’s a person down here in a box-type thing?”

“That’s a hibernation suite Oli, and no, I did not know.”

“How could you not know Robbie? You’re in control of the entire ship, wired into every working part. How could you possibly have missed the fact that there’s a hibernating person down here?”

“You’ve got me there Oli. I can only assume that whoever it is, and I can tell you now that it is an Annenian female, must have put herself in there after I was transferred to the small ship after *Cranus*

was placed into sleep mode. Once the hibernation gas is injected into the pod, it becomes completely autonomous. It doesn't require any power or maintenance. The occupant remains dormant until the re-initiation sequence is entered. I must admit though, this is the longest period of time that anyone has remained in stasis."

"Wake her up then!" begged Julie.

"I can't do that Julie. She will be infected with the virus and there is no cure. We'd be waking her up to die."

"Well I guess you'd better stop fart-arsing around with four-dimensional universes and start working on a cure!" said Oli, peering into the glass-topped cylinder longing to meet the only surviving Annenian in the Galaxy.

They split up to search all the other pods in the many rooms on the deck that also contained pods, but she was the only occupant. Sara, who had a great talent for drawing, was perched on the pod in a horse riding pose, sketching the Annenian girl. She never went anywhere without her sketch pad and had thousands of pictures, dating from early school to the present day.

One of the rooms on the same deck was a med-lab, and on entering, Oli found two pygmy-sized drones working on a cure for the illness that had wiped out an entire civilisation. They still had all the samples and data. The surviving scientists had continued working right up until the very end. *Maybe she was one of the scientists*, thought Oli.

"Maybe she was one of the scientists," said Pardy.

Oli gave Pardy a questioning glance out of the corner of his eye.

They made their way back to the bridge and Oli asked Robbie to give them an in-depth knowledge of the anatomy and social activities of the Annenians. They sat down in the bridge and Robbie gave them a presentation on the big screen. Everyone had chosen their favourite positions around the star consul and they were sticking to them. Sara had adopted the communications position, which was slightly ironic due to the fact that she was utterly hopeless at replying to messages or returning calls. Julie had unwittingly chosen the navigation console which was equally incongruous, as she could rarely find her way out of her own flat. Whenever they planned to meet anywhere as a group, Sara

would always rendezvous with Julie at her flat and go with her to the destination, otherwise everyone would be waiting for hours while Julie ended up on the wrong side of town. Ed was currently making himself comfortable with his feet up on the engineering position. The last time he had tried to perform any kind of engineering task was to change the oil in his scooter, which subsequently blew up because he had filled it with antifreeze instead of oil. Jay was fully aware of his position on the bridge; he was in charge of passenger entertainment and general well-being.

The Annenians were physically, very similar to Humans. In fact, they had placed a significant amount of their own DNA into the dumb creatures on Earth. They breathed roughly the same combination of gasses, give or take a few parts per million oxygen and nitrogen. They had only three fingers and a thumb on each hand and four toes on each foot. Their skin was considerably paler than a Human's. Sara, who had pale skin and blond hair, had always hated the fact that she couldn't tan like everyone else, but she suddenly felt an affinity with the race that had created humanity.

The Annenians ate, laughed and partied like it was 49,999. Something told Oli that when Robbie found a cure for the disease and they woke up their sleeping guest, they would get along just fine. But that, of course was why Robbie had chosen Oli for the job. His character bore the closest resemblance to an Annenian that he had ever found. Robbie did warn them that they shouldn't build up their hopes too much about finding a cure. Many scientists and AIs, equally as powerful as Robbie had worked on finding a solution, without any success.

"Do what you can buddy," said Oli.

They returned to the hibernation deck, which Oli discovered was used by Annenians who had a fear of flying. They climbed into a pod each and fell into a deep dreamy sleep, blissfully unaware of the bug-like object attached to the underside of *Cranus*.

CHAPTER 8

MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY

They parked *Cranus* inside a large crater on the far side of the moon. It was only a matter of time before some astronomer would discover the missing top of Mons Herodotus. It would be prudent to leave the vast ship, which could be easily viewed from Earth, on the side of the moon that was permanently facing away, or as it was more commonly referred to, the dark side of the moon. Just for effect, Oli asked Robbie to play the Pink Floyd track of the same name as they were coming in to land. Robbie had chosen the South Pole Aitken basin as a new home for *Cranus*. As one of the largest impact craters in the solar system, some thirteen kilometres deep and facing away from Earth, it would be highly unlikely that the ship would ever be spotted, even by a probe flying over the moon. They descended deep into the heart of the crater and a graphic display of the inside of the hole appeared on the screen. The ship came to rest, tucked under a sheer rock face the size of the Grand Canyon. *Cranus* could never land on a planet the size of Earth, it would fold under its own weight, but the low gravity on the moon allowed it to rest on a system of hundreds of legs, like a giant millipede.

*

Doctor David Branith and his team had been scanning the skies twenty four hours a day for the last week. After witnessing the strange parrot ship disappearing into the night sky, he felt sure that it would return. They had increased the radar sweep to include the space around Earth but there was so much junk up there from the last fifty years of space exploration that it was like looking for a needle in a solar system, never mind a hay stack. The night after the ship had disappeared, there was a blip on the screen over Richmond Park, but it only lasted a fraction of a second and they dismissed it as atmospheric disturbance.

Doctor Branith had been showing the strain over the last few days; after all, it's not every day that one minute you have the answer to all your questions in the palm of your hand, and then a minute later, it's all gone. His colleagues were aware that they had to tread very carefully around him. They

tried to convince him that at least he was now certain that advanced life existed somewhere out there, even if it was just a bird. But he was obsessed with finding the ship again. He thought that if he could just communicate with the owners, then he could persuade them to share some of their knowledge with him. So tirelessly, he scanned the skies and broadcast regular radio signals, inviting the parrot ship to return and meet with him.

*

The crew entered the small ship and headed for home. Robbie played Doctor Branith's invite to Pardy and they all had a bit of a giggle about it. Robbie could see the radar beams as though they were bright lights sweeping across the night sky, so he could easily drop down to Richmond Park avoiding detection. The sky was heavily overcast, which was in their favour.

On the return journey from Annenia, the crew had discussed the pros and cons of handing over the technology to humankind and had all come to the same conclusion: they just weren't ready for it. You only had to look at the problems in the Middle East, or the greed of the oil companies, fighting over control of the last reserves of oil. Humans had this obsession with money. Robbie explained that they should have moved away from this totally arbitrary way of organising the planet's resources many years ago. The billions and trillions of pounds, dollars and every other currency that were electronically moved about every day were in reality, fictitious. The true wealth of the planet was contained in the ability of the dominant species to utilise its raw materials, to enhance the development of humanity, not for a few people to possess everything. If they got their hands on the Annenian technology, it would become one more asset for a few people to abuse, furthering their quest for ownership of everything.

The Annenians had transitioned a similar period of greed where they had used money for power, but it only lasted about five centuries before in one voice, including the ones holding the power, they all shouted "hold on a minute, this is nonsense". The Annenian technology could provide unlimited energy to the people of Earth, but it would have to be exploited for the good of the planet, not for the potential wealth that it could create. It was going to take some serious thought. They all swore an oath

of secrecy. Of course, Oli would stay in contact with Robbie and if they ever fancied a jolly around the cosmos, well surely there was no harm in *that*.

But more pressing matters were at hand. It was Friday night in London and they all fancied celebrating their victory over the Throglolds with a night of clubbing. Robbie made the calculations for a rapid decent, terminating just five metres from the surface of the park, and was just about to commit when he was interrupted by Oli.

“Gumph!” he cried, “I completely forgot about Stephan.”

He suggested that they locate Stephan and pay him a visit. After all, he must have spent the last two weeks in a proper twist. Robbie established that his phone signal was emanating from the southwest coast of England in the county of Cornwall. Ed and Oli both cheered together, excited about the thought of an impromptu trip to Cornwall. Robbie moved the ship into a synchronous orbit over the Cornish coast and the viewer changed to an aerial view of a massive house perched on the edge of the cliff. A cross-hairs target appeared over the garden and the screen zoomed into that point. Then it zoomed in again, and there on the screen was the top of Stephan’s head, occasionally glowing as he took a drag from his cigarette. He was standing at the edge of the garden, looking out to sea.

“Air traffic is still on alert around England,” said Robbie, “so we’ll have to go in fast.”

The screen went blank. Robbie figured that their lives would not be enriched by watching this particular approach. When the screen came back to life, it was filled with jagged rocks. They’d come to rest in front of the cliff face, just below Stephan’s house. The rock face began to move as Robbie slowly raised the ship.

Stephan took the last drag of his cigarette. As always, he’d smoked it right down to the filter, ignoring all the warnings. He flicked the butt over the cliff and was about to turn back to the house when he saw the shower of sparks as the remainder of the cigarette hit the jet black object appearing from below the edge of the cliff. His immediate reaction was to turn and bolt for the house, but he stopped himself in mid-turn and looked back at the object. Then he barked; “no!”

The ship silently moved away from the edge of the cliff and there was a loud clunk as three legs extended to the ground. As the side door opened, he moved to a position where he could see inside by

craning his neck. To his relief but no great surprise, Oli appeared, followed by four other people, none of whom he knew.

“Oli!” he shouted, arms outstretched in welcome.

Oli ran down the ramp and prepared to administer a big Oli hug, but Stephan’s upbringing didn’t allow for such extravagant displays of affection, so he extended his right hand and offered Oli a firm shake. Oli looked down at the unusual greeting with surprise, but had no intention of pushing the hug onto someone who was already operating at maximum incredulity. He introduced the crew and they walked towards the house, with Stephan reeling off a thousand questions a minute. They all turned in reaction to the clunk of the ship’s legs. It had raised itself off the ground and proceeded to disappear through the lawn until the last piece of its dark, shimmering hull was replaced by the perfectly manicured lawn. Robbie had located an underground cave connected by many tunnels below the garden and informed them that he would await their return, safely out of sight.

They went inside the house and sat around the warped and split, old oak table in the kitchen. It was a typical old English farmhouse kitchen with uneven, chipped quarry tiles on the floor and handmade, slightly misshapen oak cabinets, the doors on which had probably never quite lined up properly. Stephan filled the kettle from the ancient-looking brass tap and placed it on the Aga, then joined them at the table to listen to the most incredible story ever to be told. He couldn’t believe that they hadn’t been informed about the approaching asteroid. But he could understand the chaos that would have ensued had it become common knowledge. After two hours of storytelling, during which he listened intently without uttering a word, he said that he would love to see the ship so Oli looked around the room and asked Robbie where he was. Robbie said that they could walk to the underground cave from the house. He directed them to the basement where they would find an arched wooden door. Stephan remembered this door from his childhood; he had always wondered what secrets lay behind it. They walked through the house and down the rickety staircase that creaked with every step, to the basement and Stephan pulled a cord, hanging from the ceiling that illuminated a barely-sufficient forty watt bulb in the middle of the room. The floor joists were clearly visible above their heads, crowded in cobwebs. It was obvious that nobody had been down here in a long while. In one corner of the room there stood

an old wooden cupboard, its varnish having long since fallen away to reveal the dry flaky wood beneath. Stephan recounted the tale from his youth when he had used that very cupboard in a game of hide and seek with his cousins. He had congratulated himself on finding the best hiding place ever, convinced that they would never find him. He closed the doors of the cupboard and was peering through the narrow gap for any sign of his playmates, when a figure dressed in a long cloak with a large hat on its head darted across his field of vision and disappeared through the locked wooden door at the end of the room. To this day he had no idea who or what the figure was. He pointed out the door and they crossed the room, treading carefully on the old wooden floor boards. Stephan reached for the round iron handle and tried to turn it, but it wouldn't budge.

“As I thought,” he said. “I tried to open this door hundreds of times when I was a kid in search of the ghost.”

Realising that he was now bigger and stronger, he lifted the handle and leant back trying to turn it and pull at the same time. Nothing. Just then, from the other side of the door came the sound of metal grinding on metal, and then they heard a loud clunk as the locking mechanism released its rusty grip. Stephan tried the handle again and this time it turned. He had to use both hands as it had become seized with age. He turned it through ninety degrees and leant back to pull it with his full weight. As the door opened he leapt backwards, stumbling with his arms flailing around him. Ed reached out to steady him and noticed that his eyes were fixed on the sinister looking figure that was standing in the doorway. It was dressed as a pirate with a feather in its hat and a long sword by its side, but what gave away its true nature was the blank, featureless head.

“Stephan, drone, drone, Stephan,” said Oli, indicating who was who with an open hand just in case there was any confusion. Stephan gave a silent wave as he composed himself, and they all piled through the doorway. They followed the drone that was lighting up the steep-sloping tunnel.

Oli sidled up to the pirate drone and whispered, “Why the pirate costume?”

The drone explained the nature of the tunnels into which they were descending. The tunnel was just about high enough for them to stand upright and seemed to go on forever. They were walking through Cornish maritime history. The labyrinth was originally a sixteenth century tin mine that was later, in

the following century, converted into a secret passage for smugglers and pirates. The house was built above the mine and had been home to some fairly unpleasant characters during the time of pirates, and now Oli was strolling through the domain of pirates with a parrot on his shoulder. The tunnel led down to the beach below, but Stephan had never discovered the entrance because apparently, it had caved in during a massive storm during the time of Nelson. His uncle was well aware of its presence, but would never allow the children to play down there in case it collapsed.

“I just thought it might be fun to awaken the rather glamorous past of this place,” said the drone by way of an explanation. Robbie wasn’t to know about Stephan’s ghostly experience so Oli kept it to himself and continued to follow Long John Silicone. Following several turns and a levelling out, the passage suddenly opened into a large cavern. The light from the drone flickered off the ceiling about five metres above and they could make out the far wall about fifty metres away. Rocks of differing sizes protruded from the walls and ceiling. Three hundred years ago this cavern would have been full of rum and other illegal substances, but now it was almost completely occupied by a black spacecraft. It was as though the cavern had been excavated with the ship in mind. It was the perfect size, with just enough space to walk around. Stephan ran his hand down the hull, as everyone did when they were introduced to the impossibly smooth material.

They made their way to the control room where Oli introduced Stephan to Robbie. As Stephan approached the console, he gasped as he ran his index finger across a row of figures at the top of the panel.

“These look like Egyptian hieroglyphs,” he said, “but more complex, and in sequences that I’ve never come across.”

“They are similar,” offered Robbie by way of explanation. “I gave the ancient people a helping hand with their language. Obviously the Annenian language was far too complex for them to grasp, so I introduced them to some simple symbols, and from those they created their own language. I was rather hoping that the language might survive through the ages, but as I’m sure you are aware, it did not.”

He sounded nostalgic and Oli was getting the impression that Robbie really missed the Annenians. He gave Stephan a guided tour of the ship and explained that it would have to remain their secret. Just as Stephan had trusted Oli with his flat, Oli felt that he could afford the same level of trust to Stephan.

“Well, if you ever need anywhere to hide it, you know where to come, don’t you?” said Stephan, pointing at the cave around them. Oli and Robbie agreed that this would make a great hideout and as long as Stephan’s uncle didn’t mind, they could spend time down here and go surfing.

“You surf?” asked Stephan excitedly.

“Yeah of course,” replied Oli and Ed together. “Do you?”

“Well, it’s been a few years now and I think I may need to rethink the wetsuit, but I used to ride the waves down here all the time as a kid. I think my old board might be in the barn.” They agreed that after they’d satisfied their need to dance the night away, they would return to Cornwall, meet up and ride some cold winter waves together.

During the walk back to the house, Oli questioned Stephan about his lack of surprise at the whole alien spaceship thing. Stephan relayed the story of the silver flash that he’d seen over the pyramids on the night that Oli had disappeared. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the possibility of alien visitors, but he had always hoped that there was some truth in it. When Oli disappeared in such a strange manner followed by the silver streak shooting straight up into the night sky, he had a strong hunch that there would turn out to be an extra-terrestrial connection. After all, Humans do not have the ability to make people pass through solid rock.

They joined Stephan for a glass of beer, and all the time that they were in the kitchen he could see Julie fidgeting and looking at her watch. It was close to ten o’clock on Saturday night and those dance floors were not going to dance the night away on their own. They invited Stephan to a night of clubbing in London but he declined. The very idea of being crammed into a room with hundreds of sweaty people gave him the willies. They said their farewells and waited on the lawn for the ship to appear.

“It looks a bit calm out there,” said Oli gazing out over the oily ocean. “We’re gonna need a few waves if ...” He cut off mid-sentence as they all felt themselves being raised off the ground. They all

looked down but there was nothing beneath them. They were floating away from the lawn, supported by an invisible barrier. Instantly, the black hull began spreading around them, replacing the grass.

“Robbie!” he shouted, but the ship continued to ascend. They could feel a repetitive dull thud from the Graviton Generator. It was much louder from outside thought Oli. Then he realised, it wasn’t the engines it was some banging house music coming from inside the ship. Everyone was holding hands attempting to steady themselves as the ship rocked slightly. Julie, Sara and Jason, who’d never ridden a surfboard in their lives fell to their knees, and in vain tried to find something to grasp. They made the mistake of looking to the side and realising that with one slip they would slide off the top and fall a great height to the ground. Only when the ship was fully out of the ground and they heard the legs clunk, did Oli think to shout into the Go-ring.

“Robbie!”

In an instant, the banging bass drum stopped, the hatch in the control room popped open and the expressionless head of the drone appeared, rather ludicrously, still decorated with a wide brimmed hat and feather.

“Oops!” They heard Robbie’s slightly embarrassed voice from inside.

Without any further words, the drone descended into the control room, the hatch closed and the ship began to sink back into the ground. When their feet were resting on terra firma, they all moved back to the patio and the ship once again appeared, this time a bit further away from the house.

“It’s my fault Stephan,” said Oli. “I’ve got him into music and he loves it so much that sometimes he can’t concentrate on the more important matters in hand.”

Stephan was grinning the width of his face at the craziness of it all. He remembered meeting Oli on the plane, and found it amusing that his space ship was as dippy as he was.

Once they were all back aboard, Robbie tried to cover his error by explaining that they were never in danger and that the matter transform would not work on complex biological matter. No reply was forthcoming from the crew, so he stepped away from the metaphorical shovel and left well alone. They shot back into space, leaving Stephan in the windswept garden, looking up at the heavens. He lit a cigarette and stood there until his fingers became numb with cold, pondering the last few hours. So

many puzzles that the pyramids had presented to scientists and historians had just been answered in one evening and he couldn't share it with anyone. He was bathing in that idea with great glee. He had one over on the stuffy intellectuals who thought that they had all the answers. He was going to enjoy this.

Robbie made the calculations for a rapid descent into Richmond Park when he was halted by a signal coming from somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. He put it on the speakers.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!" said the slightly agitated voice. "This is BA184 heavy. We have suffered complete failure of both port engines, and structural damage to port side ailerons. We are losing height rapidly...We will be forced to ditch...Current position fifty-three degrees fifty-two minutes thirty-three north, sixteen degrees twenty-two minutes fifty-nine west, flight level 250 and dropping."

A map of the Atlantic Ocean appeared on the screen, showing the position of the stricken craft. It was miles away from any land. Then they heard the reply.

"BA 184 heavy, this is UK Air Traffic Control. Message received and understood. Search and Rescue will be dispatched. Please keep us informed of your situation."

"We've got to help them!" cried Julie.

"Can you carry a 747 Robbie?" asked Oli.

"Not the whole plane Oli, it would be way too heavy, but I might be able to support the damaged side and allow them to reach land.

"Let's do it then."

With that, they altered course and ten seconds later were diving in formation alongside the stricken plane. They could see the damaged engines. It appeared that the outer engine had exploded. There was just a broken strut where it had been slung under the wing. The other engine was as naked as a jaybird with all its bodywork blown away. There were large pieces of the wing's trailing edge missing and the plane was diving at an angle of about thirty degrees from level. It was only by some miracle that the explosion hadn't removed the entire wing. Captain Fairchild and his co-pilot were battling with the controls, trying to level the plane before hitting the ocean. If they could contact the sea with the nose

up, they would stand a chance, however small, of surviving. But he knew that even if they did manage to ditch without the plane being ripped to pieces, they were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, too far from land for any helicopters to reach them, and it would take the rescue ships hours to arrive.

Twenty-five years of flying, thought Captain Fairchild, *without so much as an emergency landing*. He was one of the airlines most senior pilots and was up for retirement next year. Every pilot knew that landing safely on water that was anything but flat calm, was almost impossible. All it would take is for one engine to dig into a wave and the aircraft would cartwheel and tear itself apart. But, being the consummate professional that he was, Captain Fairchild blocked these thoughts from his head and concentrated on saving the lives of the three hundred and forty six passengers and crew crammed into this fragile aluminium tube.

“Five thousand feet,” said the co-pilot, then rapidly followed that with; “four thousand five hundred.”

They informed the passengers that they should put on their life jackets and brace for impact. They could hear the screams above the whining of the two remaining engines. This was it, the moment that every pilot feared the most, a no-win situation. The co-pilot radioed their position one final time and was just about to turn on the cabin intercom to shout the command ‘brace, brace, brace’, when the controls became lighter and ceased their shuddering. Captain Fairchild was able to pull back on the wheel and the uninviting view of the ice cold Atlantic Ocean with its white crested waves smoothly slid out of the cockpit window and was replaced by the night sky. He looked at the attitude indicator and it confirmed that they were flying level. A quick glance at the altimeter stated a height of one thousand five hundred feet above sea level.

“Any ideas?” he asked, looking across at his co-pilot.

“None at all Captain. One minute we were going down and now we're flying level. I say, don't knock it.”

Then the voice of Jenny, the chief stewardess, appeared in the captain's headphones.

“Captain, I think you'd better take a look at the port side wing.”

He looked out of his window and had to press his head against it to see all the way back to the wing. He tried to take in the sight of the jet black object flying a few metres above the wing, with a shimmering green light between it and the mangled aerofoil. He moved back to his seat, staring silently out of the cockpit window and then turned again to press his face against the side window.

“Hi, er...Captain,” he heard the mysterious voice say. “I suggest we fly straight and level all the way to England, where together, we should be able to put this plane on the ground...Oh, I'm Oli, by the way...Hi!”

Only the Captain heard Oli's voice because Robbie had isolated his headphones. He explained the situation as best as he could to his crew, throttled up the two remaining engines and headed for the west coast of Britain. The co-pilot spoke with air traffic control and informed them that they had regained control of the plane and would require the southern England airspace to be cleared of all traffic as they were limited to their present altitude. The captain decided that now was not the time to be talking about little black space ships. It would take them two and a half hours to fly the remaining fifteen hundred kilometres. They were diverted to Bristol Airport, which would be cleared of all traffic and emergency crews were preparing to line the runway. Robbie had connected to the flight deck of the 747, and Oli instructed the Captain to fly the plane as he normally would. Robbie then mimicked the control inputs of the pilot.

As the plane approached the Southwest coast of Ireland, the flight crew felt a tremendous shudder that reverberated throughout the plane.

“What was that?” shouted Captain Fairchild. They didn't feel anything on the ship, but the panic in the Captain's voice alerted them to the problem. Robbie put the damaged wing on the screen and they could all see the huge crack that had appeared along the edge, where it joined the fuselage. A metre-wide panel of the surface of the wing was beginning to peel off and was flapping in the six hundred kilometre per hour wind.

“Holy oly!” said Oli. “We're gonna lose it. Robbie?” he pleaded.

Robbie calculated the loads with a blueprint of the 747 and 0.25 of a second later said, “We'll have to place a localised force field around the affected area. If you go into the cargo bay, you'll find eight

Force Field Generators ready for you, but they all have to be turned on at the same time or they could rip the wing apart.”

He continued to explain that the four of them would have to walk out onto the wing, place the magnetic field generators on the four corners of the wing, two on top and two underneath then another on the corresponding points on the fuselage. When these were turned on, they would form an unbreakable bond between the wing and the fuselage.

“Okay, only one problem,” said Oli. “We've only got one Go-ring, and I don't think anyone's ever wing-walked a 747 in flight before.”

“The drones have just finished making another four rings Oli,” said Robbie. “I was going to surprise you with them when we got to Earth, but I think now would be as good a time as any.” The flap opened in the control console and on the tray inside appeared four shiny rings.

“Excellent!” cried Oli, both arms punching the air.

Everyone took a ring and they ran to the cargo bay, realising that the wing could part company with the plane at any moment. While they were preparing everything in the cargo bay, Robbie informed the pilot of the plan and asked him to slow the plane down to lower the stress on the airframe. Oli, Sara, Julie and Ed picked up the cigarette packet-sized generators and stood by the cargo bay door. Jay just stood there, staring at the ring, frozen to the spot.

“I can't do this guys. Sorry. I've never told you this before but I can't do heights.” His fear had begun when he was just fourteen years old, living in Bristol. He and three friends had dared each other to climb one of the cables of the Clifton Suspension Bridge. He'd got half way up and then froze with fear. It took two hours and an entire division of very angry firemen to rescue him. He would have to sit this one out. Pardy however, didn't want to miss out on the excitement, so she jumped onto Oli's shoulder and he felt her claws dig in. The door opened and the ramp extended to a position just above the wing. They gingerly stepped onto the wing and walked along the leading edge, just above the wrecked engines. At first they took each step as though walking onto an ice-covered pathway for the first time, but after a few steps they became more confident.

This is cool, thought Julie, *just like taking a walk along the river bank, albeit a river bank that was 1500 feet in the air, and travelling at 450 kilometres per hour*. She couldn't resist a little look over the edge and placed her feet as close to the front of the wing as she dared, then slowly leant forward, extending her neck. They were passing over a large town and the streetlights and houses slowly passed under the wing and out of view. She knew that they were moving forward, but there was no sensation of wind or vibration. They all gave a little wave to the shocked faces, framed with yellow life jackets that had appeared along the length of the plane. A young boy of about six years old, who had obviously been crying, peered out of a window directly ahead of them. Julie knelt down right next to the window and gave him a little wave. For all that the little boy knew, this was perfectly normal and he was obviously entertained by it all. His mother in the seat next to him however, looked somewhat more bemused.

Julie and Sara bent down to attach their devices to the top of the wing and fuselage. As the device touched the aluminium, there was a clunk and it stuck fast. Julie gave it a wiggle to make sure that it was secure but it wouldn't budge, so she continued to attach the other half to the fuselage. Oli, who had more confidence in the Go-ring than Ed, was first to step around the front of the leading edge. Ed watched in disbelief as his friend became horizontal, pointing straight out from the front of the wing. Oli gave a little Superman pose, then turned his head and grinned at Ed. Then he continued walking until he disappeared completely. Ed thought, *I can't bottle it now, I'll never hear the end of it*, so off he went. First step leaning out, second step looking down at the ground, third step feeling very queasy and finally he was upside down next to Oli, looking along the underbelly of the plane. He positioned his devices at the trailing edge of the wing. It was a most peculiar feeling crouching down on one knee but actually moving upwards. He remembered the gym lessons at school where his psychotic gym master would stand under him until he had done at least two pull-ups on the bar. He wished the psycho could see him now.

“All in position?” asked Oli.

“Yes,” said the girls in unison, followed by an affirmative from Ed, who was really getting into this now. With that, Oli counted down...“Three...two...one...Go!” and they all flicked the switches on the little boxes.

“Nothing happened,” said Oli, an air of panic in his voice.

“What did you expect?” said Robbie. “Flashing lights and a fanfare? The Field Generators are up and running and the integrity of the plane has been stabilised.”

They all cheered together. Oli and Ed made their way back to the top of the wing. Oli gave the passengers a thumbs-up and a big smile. They could see all the passengers clapping and shouting their approval through the small windows, but they couldn't hear a thing because of the noise of the engines screaming away on the other side of the plane. Oli could see the passengers on the port side of the plane telling the others what was happening, and he would have loved to be able to hear their explanation. As they were waving at the passengers, Oli saw a flash from one of the windows towards the back of the plane. *Oops*, he thought, *that'll be in all the papers tomorrow*.

They returned to the bridge of the little ship just in time to hear Air Traffic Control's instructions to the pilot for his approach to Bristol Airport.

“You *do* realise,” said Oli, “every news camera in southern England is going to be at the airport pointing cameras at the runway. There really is no way of hiding this.”

“Yeah sure Oli,” said Ed, “but we had to do it, didn't we? We couldn't just let the plane crash.”

“Correct,” said Robbie. “I'll get us out of there as soon as the plane is safely down.”

Captain Fairchild was coping with the situation in the calm manner that all the years of training had afforded him, although this set of circumstances had never been covered in any simulation. He began his approach. The controls on the plane felt a bit sluggish and he couldn't use the automatic pilot to stay within the approach zone. So with one hand on the throttles and the other on the wheel, he slowly and confidently moved the damaged jet into its final approach. Every time he throttled up, Robbie accelerated the port side of the plane, and together they kept it flying straight. For the thousands of families that lived in the flight path of Bristol airport, the roar of the engines overhead was just one

more of the many aircraft that rattled their windows every day. If they'd only looked up and seen the strange sight, it would have made the years of torment worthwhile.

Captain Fairchild knew that it wasn't over until the plane was stationary and the passengers had safely evacuated, he wanted to touch down on the very end of the runway in order to give him the maximum room to slow it down. The runway at Bristol airport was a bit short for a fully-laden 747 and he would need every metre of tarmac to stop the plane. He had reverse thrust on the starboard engines and Oli had assured him that the ship could match the thrust without ripping the wing off. They leapfrogged the last few fields and flew over the perimeter road. Just as the end of the runway disappeared under the plane, came the gentlest of jolts as all four sets of wheels contacted with the strip simultaneously. Slowly, the nose wheel found the ground and the Captain allowed a small amount of reverse thrust. As he became more confident with the stability of the craft, he added more thrust, until the shuddering of the fuselage indicated that he should ease back. With the end of the runway in view, they were still doing almost 100 kilometres per hour and the Captain was gently pressing more and more brake so as not to seize them. The end of the runway had been covered with foam, and several fire trucks were waiting on the grass. With only 100 metres left to the end of the runway, the captain hurled the throttles forward as far as they would go and stood on the brakes. The two remaining engines whined their approval and the plane began to veer to port as the brakes locked. Captain Fairchild countered the swerve with a big rudder movement and Robbie helped by turning the port side wing towards the centre of the runway. With a screech of rubber, the giant plane slid to a halt, springing back on the suspension as it stopped.

Cheers erupted from the passengers, overjoyed at their continuation of life. The cockpit was awash with very English congratulations and hearty handshakes. The Captain pressed his head against the window to see the little ship, but it was gone. All he saw were the smouldering remains of the two engines, being covered with foam from the waiting trucks.

As soon as the plane had stopped, Robbie shot back up into space at such a speed that even when viewed in slow motion, it was impossible to see anything except a blurred black streak in the night sky. Fortunately, the terminal and all the cameras were on the starboard side of the plane so the ship

was concealed by the bulk of the 747. The fact that it was night time also helped. He had set the Field Generators to self-destruct as soon as the plane came to a stop on the runway and they vaporised themselves, leaving no trace whatsoever.

The plane, which was so badly damaged that it would have to be scrapped, was taken to a hangar to be examined. As it was being towed, the wing parted company with the fuselage, thus confirming to the engineers that there was no way that the wing could have stayed on during the force of a landing. They were baffled.

“Whoever you are,” said the Captain into his headset, “thank you. We owe you our lives.”

“Ah that's nice,” said Sara.

“That's it!” exclaimed Oli. “We can't hand over this technology to the people of Earth, but we could use it to save lives. Like International Rescue!”

“I want to be Lady Penelope!” cried Sara, walking across the control room with her arms in front of her like a puppet.

“And I guess, ugh, that I'll, ugh, have to be brains,” said Jay, joining Sara in the ludicrous walk.

“If people know that it exists,” continued Oli, shaking his head at his ludicrous friends, “then maybe that's just the incentive they need to pull their fingers out and start getting along with each other.”

Robbie agreed with the plan. Obviously they wouldn't be able to stop every disaster from happening, but if the crew would give up their Earthly lives, they could certainly make a difference. Jay would have to give up his day job. He had to think about it for a while. *Accountant or space travelling hero. Mm, tricky!* Reverting to his accountant persona in a moment of clarity, he asked how they were going to live. They would still need money and food. Oli assured him, with a wink to Robbie that they would not starve.

After dropping everyone off in Richmond Park, right under the nose of Doctor Branith, Robbie headed back to the moon with Pardy. The rest of the crew hit the town. It was two o'clock in the morning and they only had a few hours left for dancing.

Captain Fairchild had to submit a detailed report and enough people on the plane had seen the ship, so it was going to be big news for some time. Several people with window seats had taken photos of the ship and crew but it was dark outside and every attempt to use the flash had only resulted in an over-exposed shot of the window. The passengers were all interviewed by Doctor David Branith's team at UFID, and it became obvious that this was the same ship. So it was not piloted by a parrot, but by a group of youths. He was now more confused than ever.

CHAPTER 9

CAPTIVE

Something wasn't right. Robbie was certain that he had shut down *Cranus* when they left, but there were lights on in the bridge section. The faint glow coming from the observation dome was flickering as though someone was walking around carrying a flash light. He took the ship into a close hover above the mountain. Then suddenly, everything went blank. No mountain, no *Cranus*, no Moon.

*

'Launch minus 4 hours 30 minutes and counting.'

The read-out on the giant clock at Kennedy Space Centre indicated to the flight crew that it was time to suit up and head out to launch pad 39A, where the newly commissioned shuttle, *Olympia*, was being prepared for blast-off. In the cargo bay was an experimental space capsule called *Persius*, designed to be launched from space. It had been constructed to serve as a maintenance vehicle, to remain in orbit at the International Space Station, where its two-man crew would carry out essential repairs on damaged satellites, thus eliminating the vast expense of leaving Earth's atmosphere. The crew would live and work on the I.S.S. until one of the thousands of satellites that orbit the earth, required maintenance. If they required parts to fix the problem, these parts could be sent up to them in the regular, unmanned, supply rocket. With extra fuel tanks strapped to either side, it could travel to the moon, land and return to the space station. But the target for its maiden flight was not the moon, but the new asteroid that had mysteriously appeared in the night sky.

The normal five-man crew of the shuttle was boosted by the two astronauts who had been training to fly the capsule. Its first flight had been scheduled for the following January, but in view of recent events, they had brought it forward. Commander James Calham and his crew were helped into their suits and taken to the waiting van that would transport them to the launch pad.

"This is the stuff that I joined up for," said Captain William 'Flameout' O'Connell.

He'd acquired the nick name 'Flameout' because of the unusually large number of times that he'd lost both engines whilst flying fighter jets. On every occasion, he'd stayed with the aircraft and managed to relight the engines and save the plane. In many ways he was the best fighter pilot that had ever lived, but he had a flair for finding trouble, whether in the cockpit, or in a bar. On one occasion, he broke formation and flew down the Grand Canyon at Mach 2. Witnesses had seen the sonic cone before they heard the roar of the F18. Ordinarily he would have been grounded for such a breach, but somehow he managed to retain his wings and live to fly another day. He was older and theoretically wiser than he had been in his early years. He'd calmed down significantly in the last few years because he had his sights set on space and there was no room for cowboys in the space programme. His dream came true when he was commissioned to test fly *Persius* and now, he was going into space sooner than expected.

"What do you reckon we'll find up there?"

"A big rock," answered his co-pilot Captain Bugsey "Pitcher" Buckhannon, in his deep, monotone voice. He had been named for his ability to down a whole pitcher of ale in five seconds. But that was years ago as a young man, he was a completely different person now; single minded and unable to suffer fools. He was not renowned for his conversational prowess and Flameout was really not looking forward to being stuck in a five metre by two metre capsule with him for several days.

When the shuttle reached its orbit, the capsule would be released from the cargo bay and with the use of thrusters would move to a safe distance from the shuttle and fire its own boosters. It would make a single orbit of the earth using the slingshot to increase its speed and be fired out towards the Moonaki, as it had been named by the crew. On approaching the body, they would fire retro rockets, slow to a speed matching that of the rock and land on the surface. They would then take samples and, using what was left of their fuel, blast off and return to the waiting shuttle.

The duration of the mission was expected to be five days.

'Lift off minus 10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2...1... We have main engine ignition...We have lift off...Olympia has cleared the tower.'

The crew of the shuttle gripped the armrests as the shuttle accelerated away from Earth. Flameout couldn't believe the level of noise and vibration. *How the hell can this bird remain in one piece?* he thought, as did everyone on their first hair-raising ride out of the atmosphere. No amount of simulator training could prepare them for the actual experience. This was the first NASA launch that had warranted full television coverage for many years. The attention span of the general public being similar to that of a cod, meant that each successive shuttle launch received exponentially fewer viewers than the last. But this shuttle was very different in design. It was fifty percent larger than *Atlantis* and *Discovery*, and therefore sported considerably larger engines. The shuttle itself had only the merest hint of wing surface along the length of the fuselage. This was to reduce drag on launch. The wings would be unfolded from within the underside of the craft for re-entry.

The ground shook for miles around as the solid rocket boosters and the shuttle's own rockets laboured to haul the two thousand five hundred tons of vehicle and fuel away from the launch pad. Nine minutes later, the shuttle was in orbit and the crew were busying themselves with preparations to launch the capsule.

*

The launch had not gone unnoticed. The Throglid captain was watching this feeble attempt at space travel.

"If it comes this way, destroy it," he gurgled.

He was on his way down to the hanger bay to drool over his newly acquired trophy. He snarled to himself in a Throglid version of a chuckle as he recounted the clever plan that had brought them to this barren moon orbiting the ugly blue and green planet. When the Throglid fleet had fled *Cranus*, the Captain returned under cover of sensor block that only worked at sub-light speeds because of the energy that it required. He'd clamped the ship to the underside of *Cranus* and hitched a lift to the earth system. As they passed the sun, he uncoupled from *Cranus* and drifted through space monitoring *Cranus'* path. When the little ship left the moon for the blue planet he was rather confused. The ugly creature was obviously one of the inhabitants of the planet, but following a survey of the world, monitoring many forms of communication, he concluded that the two ships of his desire had not been

built by these imbeciles. But when *Cranus* belonged to him, he was looking forward to going down there and having some fun with them. Maybe he could add the skull of their leader to his collection. He watched the little ship leave the moon and enter the atmosphere of the planet, fired up his engines and headed for the moon. He formulated a plan of action; to enter the great ship and steal it before the ugly creature returned. His attack group had entered the huge ship using a liberal amount of brute force and a not-inconsiderable level of ignorance. They then located the bridge. But all their efforts to make any of the mystifying equipment come to life had been in vain. It appeared that they would require the ugly creature. So Grrghracksh headed back into space to prepare a trap. When the small craft appeared, he approached it under cover of the sensor block with the hangar bay doors open, and swallowed it whole.

The Throglid Captain approached the hangar bay door and it slid open. There in front of him was the greatest triumph of his career and his career had indeed been long and illustrious. He was the most decorated captain in the fleet and last year he'd broken the record for slaughter to consumption, previously held by Gorgaff the Kicker. Just wait until they saw what he was about to bring back to the home world. His name would be entered onto the Tower of Invincibles for all of eternity. All he had to do was defeat the small but unbelievably powerful ugly being and work out how to get the gurking thing started. The secret, and maybe even the ugly creature itself, lay inside the little ship over which he was now drawling. It was suspended above the floor by a web of Taglar chains driven into the hull. Robbie discovered that these chains were sealed at the molecular level, making them the strongest substance he'd ever encountered. The Captain walked under the ship, running his hand down the smooth surface as he went. He brought his other fist up against the hull with such force that the chains wobbled and Pardy nearly fell off her perch.

“Come out now and I will make your death an honourable one.” he gurgled.

This was turning into a very bad day, thought Pardy. She wanted to be home with a bucket of buttered seeds and a preening tongue. But she felt sure that somehow, Oli would come to the rescue. How he was going to get to the moon without a ship, she hadn't yet worked out.

Commander Grrghracksh raised himself a few more centimetres by standing on the tips of his enormous feet and placed his ear to the hull. The next memory that he had, was waking up on the floor with two members of the crew staring at him in a; *if he's dead I want the shoulder* kind of way. The shoulder was known to be the best part of a Throgloid, and was considered a delicacy usually reserved for family members or victors and the two crew members were both drawling, in a most unattractive manner at the thought. He leaped to his feet, pushing the two expectant Throgloids away with such power that one of them flew through the air, ending his impromptu journey bent double on one of the Taglar chains. He flopped limply to the floor and the other unlucky fellow picked himself out of the Throgloid-shaped indentation in the bulkhead, making a hasty exit.

Robbie had sent a localised electric current right into the captain's ear. This would have killed most creatures, but fortunately for the Captain, a Throgloid's brain is not situated in his head, it's kept out of harm's way in the middle of the torso.

Captain Grrghracksh ordered charges to be placed in the middle of the roof. He was going to get into this ship if he had to destroy it in the process. The main prize after all, was the big ship sitting on the moon below. They positioned a stepladder against the side of the ship and the lucky crew member who had been picked for the assignment tentatively climbed to the roof of the ship. He had two explosive charges in his right hand, leaving him the other to climb the ladder. Gingerly, he stepped onto the roof of the ship.

"Put them in the middle," ordered the Captain, pointing towards the centre of the ship.

The crewmember took one step then suddenly started tap dancing across the top of the ship as Robbie hit him with a bolt of electricity every time his foot hit the hull. He dropped the explosives and the Captain heard their painful trundle as they rolled along the top of the ship, straight over the front, before crashing to the floor. Everyone in the hangar followed their journey till they came to rest against the sidewall. They were all well aware of the instability properties of Throgloid explosives. There was a general sigh of relief around the room. The unfortunate dancing Throgloid piro uetted his way along the length of the ship, producing a sorrowful wailing sound every time his foot contacted the hull. When he reached the front, he flew straight off the end landing in a heap on the hangar bay

floor. He probably would have survived the fall with just a few minor bruises. What did for him was the inevitable full-force kick from the Captain, which sent him flying across the hangar, finally slamming him into the wall. He was scooped up by two Throgloids, who carried him to the already overstretched medical centre.

For the next attempt, they attached a harness around the waist of another 'willing' volunteer and swung him from a crane over the top of the ship. As he arrived at the centre, clutching the charges in one hand, Robbie directed a highly localise beam of Matter Transform, which cut clean through the rope. The Throgloid slammed down onto the ship where a couple of thousand amps of current awaited his arrival. Following another great performance of a Throgloid River Dance, he landed with a thud on the hangar floor. As his eyes began to focus, he turned his head to realise that he had landed squarely at the feet of the captain who showed his displeasure with a size seventeen to the head.

Finally, they did away with the living element and lowered the explosives onto the ship with the crane and some Taglar chains. The captain roared and everyone evacuated the hangar. He pressed the remote detonation button and the hangar walls shook violently with the deafening explosion. He held up his hand, ordering the eager Throgloids to let him enter first. He wanted to bathe in the glory of his victory. The door opened and he took one step into the smoke-filled room to inspect the damage. He half expected to be greeted by the ugly creature and so he was cradling one of the stolen pulse rifles from *Cranus*, ready to fire. The smoke was dense and he could barely make out the shape of the ship. With the pulse rifle at his shoulder and a fat finger resting on the trigger, he moved across the hangar. He stepped onto a lifting platform and raised it a few metres from the hangar floor. He was aiming the gun at the roof of the ship, expecting to see a choking alien emerge from the gaping hole, but as the smoke cleared he felt a welling of anger inside him, the like of which he hadn't felt since his first wedding night.

A Throgloid wedding was slightly unusual, in that instead of marrying for love, they would marry for hate. If a Throgloid warrior hated another warrior to such a level that killing him would not suffice and the eradication of his genetic line was the only way to achieve fulfilment, he would marry him. At the wedding ceremony, all of the members of each family would be present and when the two warriors

were joined in an extremely unholy matrimony, the males would proceed to kick every shade out of each other. No weapons were allowed at the ceremony and the fights sometimes lasted for many hours, until all the males of one family were dead. Then the victors would claim the females of the dead as their own. This usually led to a punch up between the remaining males of the victorious family. There were no written rules for this second skirmish, so weapons were permitted and it was usually over pretty quickly.

As the Captain looked up from the black, totally unmarked hull of the little ship, his anger welled up inside him like a volcano straining to burst its cap. Instead of blowing a hole in the ship, the explosion had been directed upwards and had blasted a four metre wide hole in the ceiling of the hangar. As though that wasn't bad enough, situated directly above the hangar, was the Captain's room. He watched in dismay as the last of his priceless collection of Throgloid warrior skulls wobbled a few times and then toppled off the smashed display unit, bounced twice across the roof of the ship and exploded into a thousand pieces on the hangar floor below.

It had taken the Captain all of his adult life to collect his trophies. They represented his entire worth, his reason for living and they were all gone. He let out a blood-curdling howl that rattled the sides of the cupboard in which Pardy was hiding.

“Are they inside?” she asked in a fit of panic.

“No,” said Robbie, “They're finding me to be rather a tough nut to crack.”

The Captain jumped down from the platform and ran out of the hangar to find the gump who had planted the charges, but he was long since gone. He'd found the nearest airlock and released himself into space. It was definitely the less painful option. Captain Grrghracksh raised the pulse rifle to his waist and pointed it at the ship. He didn't know what this weapon would do, but it certainly looked like it could pack a punch. In his fit of rage, he had turned the power meter to full and he was now prepared to destroy the ship rather than allow it to ridicule him further. Robbie was willing him to pull the trigger. He would be able to deflect the pulse into the heart of the Throgloid ship and when it exploded he would be left floating in space...In theory. But the captain was a strange one. Most

Throgloids of old would have not hesitated, but he seemed to be in possession of slightly greater mental prowess than the average Throgloid. He lowered the weapon and stormed out of the hangar.

*

The music was pumping in the club. Oli and the crew were just getting into the mood when Roberta tapped Oli on the shoulder.

“What's up?” he shouted.

Roberta made a strange gesture across her mouth whilst shaking her head, and Oli took that to mean *I can't talk here*. So he gesticulated for her to follow him out to a quiet area. They reached the chill-out part of the club and had to step across the minefield of bodies and beer bottles spread about the floor to reach an uninhabited section.

“What's up?” he repeated. But she just made the same gesture.

“Okay,” he said. “If you can't speak for whatever reason, tell me with your hands. You know Charades?”

She took Oli to the corner of the room and turned her back on all the people, not that they would have noticed even if a purple pig wearing a pink tutu happened to be dancing in the middle of the room. She held her hand out and it morphed into the shape of the little ship.

“The ship!” shouted Oli, impressed that he'd guessed it with such ease. He was never very good at Charades and would usually get bored long before the game ended. Then Roberta crossed her hands palm down and moved them outwards several times whilst shaking her head.

“Ah...It's not a ship?” he queried.

She held up the ship replica again.

“Yes,” said Oli, “I got that bit. The ship.”

Then Roberta pointed to her ear and shook her head.

“You can't hear the ship? You can't hear the ship!” he reiterated. “What does that mean? Where is it?”

She held out her hands as though to say, *your guess is as good as mine*.

Oli realised that without a connection to the ship, the drone was unable to talk, because it was Robbie's voice coming from her. The drone didn't actually possess the power of speech. Roberta made a gesture of writing on her hand. Oli understood that she wanted a pen and paper to aid communication. So they headed back to the dance floor to find Sara. She never went anywhere without her sketchpad, even in a club. It always amused Oli; *where did she keep it in that skimpy little outfit?* He shouted to the crew to follow him outside, to an area where they could talk freely and two minutes later they were all on the busy London street outside the club.

"What's up?" enquired Ed.

Oli explained the problem and handed the sketchpad to Roberta, who scratched away for about one second and handed it back to Oli.

He read out loud. "The Throgloids are back! They have the little ship captive on board their vessel. Robbie has been in contact using a very basic radio carrier wave. The Throgloids are blocking everything else. We need to get to *Cranus* and set up a connection that will allow Robbie to control it from the little ship. You of course, will need to give the voice command and then we can finish what we started a few days ago."

"You wrote all of that in less than a second," said Oli, focusing once again on completely the wrong topic. Roberta gave a nonchalant shrug of her shoulders, scribbled something else for a second or two, and then handed it to Oli. Oli scrutinised the image on the page, turning it through ninety degrees whilst simultaneously tilting his head, before finally realising that the word 'YES', cunningly emerged from a complex design of leaves and flowers.

"Now you're just showing off," said Oli, smirking at the drone.

"There's only one small problem," said Oli, not wanting to seem unduly negative. "Cranus is on the moon and we are in London." Roberta grabbed the pad out of Oli's hand and wrote again.

"I have a plan. We need to find somewhere secluded. I'll explain on the way."

They walked along the street, searching for an empty building. Finally after scouring three side streets and one dead end they found an old derelict warehouse. The large, double wooden doors, had a huge padlock and chain securing them. Oli, forgetting for a second who was standing next to him,

picked up the padlock, uttered a sigh and started looking around for another place in which to hide. Roberta cupped the padlock in her delicate hand, gave it a little squeeze and it disintegrated. The crew all looked at each other with one silent, unified thought. The door swung open to reveal an empty shell of a building. There were old wooden boxes, smashed glass from all the broken windows, newspapers and a smell that was reminiscent of a city tower block elevator.

“Right, what’s the plan?” asked Oli. Roberta wrote in the pad that the micro-drones making up the figure of Roberta, fortunately nearly all three million could assume any shape they wanted. They would be able to make a single-seat pod transport. Each of the drones was fitted with a micro Graviton Generator, allowing it to fly around the ship to carry out essential repairs. If they combined the power of one million of these Generators, they should be able to reach the moon in about six hours. Robbie would have to stall the Captain until they reached Cranus.

“Sorry guys,” said Oli. “It looks like I’m gonna have to do this one alone.”

Roberta was already starting to change shape. Firstly, she lost all her colour, the red shoes, the mini skirt and crop top and when she was a blank humanoid form, the legs began to dissolve into a puddle on the floor. As more of the body sank downwards, the puddle began to form a bowl shape around the remaining torso and head. The pod that slowly formed was about the size of a motorcycle sidecar with a pointed nose and tapered back end. Roberta’s upper torso sank into the pod and Oli peered in to see it forming a seat and to his delight, two control joysticks similar to the ones on the ship. Four stubby legs appeared from the sides of the pod and lifted it a couple of centimetres off the floor.

Oli was just about to place his right foot into the pod when he stopped.

“Hold on a minute,” he said, speaking into the open pod, “I’ve got a better idea. You know that Mini-Mal surfboard leaning against the wall of our flat?”

He assumed the drones had heard and understood. “Well,” he continued, but the pod was already flattening itself into the shape of a board. When it was finished, the board hovered a few centimetres above the ground. There was a small joystick control connected to the board by a length of cable. Oli picked it up and stepped on. He positioned his feet to get a feel for the balance, and then hopped off again. He went round the crew, giving them all big Oli hugs. There were a few tears so he reassured

them that he would be fine and said he'd call them all as soon as it was over. He gave the Go-ring a tap and hopped back onto the board which felt as solid as a rock. He waved a final farewell to the crew.

There were no navigation instruments, but the moon was a big enough target to aim for. Oli gave the throttle stick a gentle prod, and the surf board shot forward. The control was a little bit more sensitive than Oli had anticipated, and they shot straight through the brick wall at the end of the warehouse. The explosion of bricks and dust fell away from the board and Oli looked over his shoulder at the crumbling wall, with his four friends gathering in the new opening, shaking their heads and laughing.

“Oops!”

They were hurtling along the narrow backstreet, straight towards a very posh looking furniture shop. He didn't fancy having to explain the destruction of a shop front to its owners, so he lent forward as though he were digging the right hand rail of the board into an imaginary wave. At the same time he put more weight on his rear foot pushing the back of the board down. The board lifted its nose and carved a right hand turn through the air, clearing the roof of the building. He pushed the throttle all the way forward and they shot straight up. He let out a massive ‘yee-ha!’ as London became nothing more than a bright splodge on the landscape. At a height of thirty five thousand feet, they narrowly avoided an AWACS aircraft that had been circling London all night, searching for any sign of the alien craft.

“What was that?” asked the pilot.

“It looked like a youth on a surf board sir,” answered the Second-in-Command. No report was filed.

“Oops,” said Oli, as he fought every urge within him to carve into the wake of the military aircraft and ride the massive wing as it cut through the air. They cleared the atmosphere and entered space. A most odd feeling thought Oli, as he turned the board to follow the surface of the earth. They crossed the North Sea, flew over Scandinavia and into Russia. Eventually, the new moon rose above the horizon. They continued for a few seconds and the old moon majestically slid into view. They left Earth orbit and he pointed the nose at the target. The micro-drones were creating a distortion field

around the board to scramble any detection by the Throglolds. They didn't really need to do that, as the Throglolds were far too busy trying to break into the little ship to have noticed a surfboard careering towards them.

*

"Doctor Branith," called George, the Radar Operator at the UFO Investigation Department. "I've got something on my screen that I think you should take a look at."

Doctor Branith placed his cup of extra strong black coffee, his staple diet for the last week, on his desk. He pushed the photograph of the black space ship to one side and walked across the technology-packed room to the radar section.

"What is it?" he asked. An unmistakable air of complacency in his voice. Was this going to be yet another meteorite burning up on entry, or maybe a weather balloon entering the very limit of the Earth's Stratosphere? George played back the recording of a small object moving across the sky at great speed, and Doctor Branith immediately dismissed it as a meteorite.

"I don't think so," said George, "mainly because it's leaving the Earth's atmosphere and accelerating."

George explained to his boss that he had started tracking the object over London, it headed out over the North Sea and as it left the atmosphere it accelerated to One hundred thousand kilometres per hour. At that point, he explained rather sheepishly that he had lost contact with the object.

"Was it the ship?" asked Doctor Branith, a newfound animation in his voice.

"No Doctor," replied George, "the object was only about two metres in length with a mass of about two hundred kilos."

Doctor Branith immediately ordered the radar scan of space around the Earth to begin. The recently launched RadarX satellite was launched by the European Space Agency to accurately map the trajectories of all the space junk orbiting the planet. It was easily turned around to point away from the earth to scan the void of space. It had taken Doctor Branith a long time and many favours, but he had acquired temporary, free access to the satellite. They began the sweep from the last known position of

the object and worked outwards. After just a few minutes, a tiny blip appeared on the screen, heading towards the moon.

“That’s it,” cried Doctor Branith pointing excitedly at the screen. “Now don’t lose it! I want to know where it goes and when it returns.”

He strode back to his desk, looked down at the photo and allowed himself a wry smile.

*

Commander Grrghracksh had ordered a hole to be drilled in the side of the ship so that they could pump poisonous gas into it. Unfortunately, each time the drill tip touched the hull, Robbie sent a highly localised electrical charge to that tiny point. They’d melted four drills and fried four Throgloids before the Captain changed the drill bits for non-conductive material. The drill bit bored its way into the hull and within a few minutes it was breached. The drill was quickly removed and they prepared to insert a hose into the hole. Robbie was a bit short on micro-drones once again, having used most of them to construct Roberta. He had managed to construct a few hundred during his captivity, but this amounted to fighting a rhino with a fly swat. He sent the drones to the hole. They worked quickly, and by the time the hose crew reached the hole, it was no longer there.

“Drill again!” shouted the Captain, ordering another drill team to work on the other side of the hull. He’s a clever one this Captain, thought Robbie. It was almost as though he knew that they were short of micro-drones. As the two holes appeared in the hull, the drones worked frantically to repair one, but they unfortunately couldn’t get to the other one before the hose was inserted and Cargium gas began to pour into the ship.

Cargium had been developed in the last great conflict on Throwgus and had played a great hand in the eventual victory of the Gagmazi tribe. It attacked the central nervous system of any living creature and induced paralysis within ten seconds. It could be absorbed through the skin or lungs, and would even find its way in through a germ warfare suit. The gas was an intelligent virus, and any that had failed to locate a target within ten minutes would self-destruct. Those that found a victim would remain active in the victim’s body until the deliverers of the virus dealt with the unlucky recipient. The victors would enter the area where the paralysed but fully conscious enemies were waiting for the

touch of a Grax. Unfortunately, they'd made the virus a little too intelligent and it got to thinking *why should I do my job and then top myself?* So, on one delivery of the virus, the attackers were greeted by the same fate as the enemy. That particular piece of land was still under quarantine, and the Throgloid warriors from both sides were still lying there waiting for the relief of death. The decent thing would have been to drop a few bombs on them, but the Throgloids were never renowned for doing the decent thing.

The new virus was far more efficient and not at all likely to turn on its owners. Robbie placed a force field around Pardy's hideaway and waited. The Captain waited for ten minutes, then, believing that the ship was now unprotected by the ugly creature, ordered a new set of directional charges to be positioned on the underside of the hull. They left the hangar and detonated the charges. There was a deafening bang that vibrated throughout the Throgloid vessel and the door slid open. If the Captain hadn't been hanging onto a rail in the corridor, he would have been sucked into the hangar and out into space through the gaping hole in the floor, along with the other three less fortunate Throgloids. As his legs trailed horizontally towards the bay, the hurricane force wind tearing at his body, he reached out with one hand and hit the door close button. The door slid shut and the Captain fell to the floor in a most ungraceful manner. He jumped up and started kicking and punching the walls and howling in disbelief. The Throgloids hadn't developed any form of artificial intelligence. They had only the primitive computer on the captured ship from which to learn and anyway, they would never trust their safety to a computer. So he hadn't even considered that there might be an artificial entity on the ship that was causing all the trouble, until now. But nothing could have survived the gas, so he deduced that it must be the ship's computer that was somehow orchestrating the mayhem. Oh, how he wanted to get his hands on that computer.

It took an hour and a half for a party of Throgloids wearing suits to seal the hole in the bay. The Captain sat in his office by the bridge, looking down at the ship through the gaping hole in the floor, now protected from the vacuum of the hangar deck by a force field. His anger was finding hitherto unexplored boundaries as he ploughed his way through a crate of Throgloid ale and brooded over the remains of his lifetime's work, lying in pieces on the floor. He would capture the ship or destroy it.

The micro-drones had discarded the hose and sealed the hole, and Robbie waited patiently for the next barrage of abuse. Pardy was becoming a little claustrophobic in her airtight hiding place, so once the gas had all been ejected, Robbie opened the door and she flew to her perch. Anyway, it sounded as though Robbie was having all the fun and she really didn't want to miss it.

The moon grew larger in Oli's field of vision. He was only thirty minutes from touching down. He'd seen a distant flash emanating from the Throgloid ship and chuckled to himself, imagining the chaos that Robbie was causing. On the other side of Earth, Flameout and Pitcher were sat side by side in the capsule, which was being lifted out of the cargo bay with the robot arm. They were busying themselves running last minute checks. The shape of the capsule was a flattened ellipsoid, with a curved cockpit window recessed into the shape of the hull. It wasn't designed to re-enter Earth's atmosphere so it didn't need any heavy heat-shielding. The rear half of the little craft was taken up by two smaller versions of the liquid fuelled rockets used by the shuttle. Once *Persius* was in position, the arm lifted a tank containing the liquid hydrogen and oxygen needed to propel the craft towards the rock and three astronauts from the shuttle, attached it to the underside of the little ship. This would be jettisoned after the burn around Earth, leaving them enough fuel on board to land the craft and boost it back home, although the journey back would take considerably longer. The space-walking astronauts returned to the shuttle and Captain O'Connell used the small jet boosters to push the craft to a safe distance. When they were five hundred metres away, the computer took over and aimed the ship for the blast around Earth. *This is going to be good*, he thought. They were about to break the speed record for space flight, as long as you didn't take into consideration Oli and the crew travelling at hundreds of billions of kilometres per hour over the previous week.

The computer screen in the middle of the flight deck flashed the green numbers and the two men pushed their heads firmly into the head restraints. This was going to kick a bit.

10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...

*

The Throgloid Captain had decided to use an electro-magnetic pulse to disable the ship's computer. The pulse would temporarily knock out all the systems on his ship, but he would be able to work in torchlight, plant the charges and finally take control of the ship before it regained consciousness.

"Great plan," sniggered Robbie, as he watched them wheeling in the bulky EM pulse generator, "except for the fact that all Annenian AI units are fitted with EM shielding." A virtual smirk appeared across his circuits.

"This guy's fun", he said to Pardy as she danced excitedly on her perch. He hadn't enjoyed himself this much since the last annual artificial intelligence round Annenia race of 33,022, which of course he'd won. It was a great annual race, where the best ships of the fleet had to race around the solar system of Annenia, collecting clues that were hidden on the other planets. The locations of the clues were given to them in three dimensional sixty four digit coded grid references, that they had to break on the way to the next planet whilst playing four dimensional telepathic Hacra against the top ten Hacra masters of Annenia. It was a fun day out. He turned the screen on so that Pardy could watch the game unfold.

Suddenly everything outside the ship went dark. There was no explosion, just a small flash and then nothing. Of course, all the lights inside the little ship were still working, but the Captain didn't know that. Four Throgloids appeared with torches, watched silently by Robbie and Pardy. The Throgloids hurriedly planted charges under the ship, following the instructions of a very confident-looking Captain. *It's very odd*, thought Robbie. They were all whispering as though they didn't want to wake up the sleeping ship.

With the charges placed in the same position as before, they scurried out and the next instant there was a flash, the door opened and four Throgloids flew across the screen, through the hangar and exited through the fresh hole in the hull. They could hear the Captain's howls from inside the ship and they could see his feet flapping at the entrance to the hangar. Pardy found herself wishing that he would let go and disappear into space but once again he managed to close the door. Both Pardy and Robbie were beside themselves with laughter. Robbie thought he was going to bust a circuit.

*

Oli had approached the moon on the light side, not for any other reason than he fancied surfing across the mountainous surface of the moon, skimming past rocks and diving in and out of craters. He accepted the urgency of the situation, but why not have some fun on the way to battle? He landed a little way from *Cranus*' position and proceeded on foot to the edge of the open crater. The micro-drones had changed back into a humanoid form and had adjusted the gravity setting on Oli's Go-ring to enable him to bound along in ten metre strides. They reached the edge of the crater and crawled to the lip to look down onto the tiny shape of *Cranus*, thirteen kilometres below. There were lights flickering in the bridge section, so he knew that the Throgloids were still on board. Oli stood at the edge, staring at the near-shear drop over which he was about to step. *Woa, this puts dropping in on a five metre wave into perspective.* But as he knew too well from his early days of surfing; *he who fears never cheers.*

They bounded down the side of the crater, kicking up dust and leaping over huge boulders. Their descent was more akin to controlled falling than running. They were plummeting fifty metres with every step. Oli was fond of dune jumping in Cornwall. He would leap from the top of the dune and try to stay on his feet till he reached the bottom. Inevitably he would lose his footing and roll, face over base to the soft, golden sand on the beach below. This was similar to dune jumping, but a million times more intense. They didn't want to alert the Throgloids of their presence so they weren't using any torches and the side of the crater was littered with huge obstacles that tripped Oli, causing him to tumble after just a few seconds. He rolled head over heels, bouncing off rocks and ramping off ridges of dirt. He was completely airborne and upside down as he passed over the head of the drone, who was performing a perfect, slow-motion moon ballet, every leap a textbook move sending it closer to the bottom of the crater.

As Oli flew through the vacuum, he managed to straighten himself up and land on his feet, still flying forward at a rate of knots. He attempted to copy the movement of the drone but instead, continued spiralling through space once again. It was exactly like dune jumping but without the pain. In the end, he gave up all attempts at dignity and let the enhanced gravity take over. He quickly but gracelessly reached the bottom of the crater, lying upside down next to the boulder that had halted his

progress. He was picking himself up when, as though it had just stepped off a bus and with the merest hint of a plume of dust, the drone landed next to him and offered him a helping hand.

“Remind me to take you dune jumping when we get back,” said Oli, graciously accepting the hand of the drone. They were now just a short walk from Cranus, and they set out towards a small round hatch on the belly of the ship. Cranus looked massive from here. It was like standing under a super tanker in dry dock. Hundreds of sets of enormous legs running down the length of the ship lifted it three metres from the dusty surface of the crater. The hatch was three metres above them so the drone had to jump up to it. As it reached the door, it placed one hand, which had morphed into a sucker, against the hull to fasten itself, it then released its index finger into the door mechanism and the door rolled to one side to reveal a small airlock.

Oli gave a sharp push with his legs and floated towards the waiting drone, who caught him as he sailed passed. The drone opened a cabinet on the wall of the airlock and pulled out two small silver tubes. It reached out and placed one of the tubes next to Oli’s head. The tube produced a beam of light on the wall of the airlock. He instinctively turned to look at it, but it was no longer there. It was following his head movement. He looked up, the light shone on the ceiling of the lock, he looked at the drone and the light lit up the drone. It was a headlight, tuned to the brain frequency of the wearer. It would hover a few centimetres to the side of the head and follow every movement.

Club toy, thought Oli.

The drone moved to the door and released two fingers into the control panel, there followed a hissing noise as the airlock was pressurised. The door opened and they entered the bottom deck of the ship. The Throgloids obviously hadn’t succeeded in getting any power to the ship; not even the emergency lighting was working. Oli followed the drone to a lift door. The drone’s hand morphed into a large sucker again and it placed it on the elevator door. It opened the door just enough to allow them to enter. It could have sent drones in to the electronics to operate the lift, but any Throgloids who were on the bridge would have heard the movement. Oli was eyeing the ladder at the back of the shaft and was visualizing the impending climb with a certain amount of trepidation to say the least. He had just

placed one hand on a rung, ready to begin the gruelling climb, when the drone tapped him on the shoulder.

“Oh yeah, silly me,” he said.

A platform, wide enough to support Oli’s feet, grew out of the lower back of the drone and a handle appeared at the back of its head. Oli climbed onto the drone’s back and grabbed hold of the handle with both hands. The drone lifted off and slowly made its way up the shaft. When they reached the doors to the bridge, it stopped and placed a finger against the joint between the doors, sending three micro-drones to survey the situation. Unbeknown to the Throgloids, who were frantically pushing every button in sight, in a futile attempt to prevent their imminent demise, the drones flew around the bridge, disarming all their weapons. They didn’t want the oafs shooting up Cranus’ bridge after all. The drones reported back that there were ten Throgloids, all armed to the teeth with totally disarmed and harmless weapons.

“I hope you don’t expect me to go in there and start fist fighting,” said Oli, leaning round the head of the drone to speak to the featureless phizzog. “I’ve never punched anyone in my life, and I really don’t think that I could.”

The drone shook its head and indicated for Oli to wait by the lift. Oli breathed a sigh of relief. He always found that he could talk his way out of any situation, but mainly people liked him from the start, so there was no need for fisticuffs. Even the bullies at school had left him unmolested, probably because he was no sport.

The Throgloids on the bridge had been given instructions to continue with their fruitless efforts to get the ship running, but of course they’d had no success and were all preparing themselves for the usual reward for failure. They had talked about using the weapons to oust the Captain and take charge of the ship, but a Throgloid Commander only became a Commander because he had defeated all others in his path and the fate for the perpetrators of a failed mutiny was unspeakable. So they had resigned themselves to their slow and painful death. They all stopped as one and turned to see the lift doors slide open. In floated the ugly creature, on the back of the weird-looking robot thing. Oli

jumped off the back of the drone and stood with his back to the wall, looking round the bridge at the fearsome collection of brutes.

“Helloooo,” he offered, with a completely incongruous thumbs-up.

It was all over in the blink of an eye. Before the Throgloids could even muster a thought to raise their weapons and point them at the enemy, in a blur of motion the drone flew around the bridge, killing each Throgloid with a single blow to the abdomen. All that Oli saw was a blurry streak darting around the bridge. It was all over in less than two seconds. Oli was still looking at the first Throgloid who was just hitting the floor in a heap, when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He jerked his head round to see the drone standing next to him and in his peripheral vision the Throgloids were falling like dominos, in slow motion due to the low gravity.

Now Oli deplored any kind of violence, but he found himself nodding in approval. He was definitely playing for the right team. The drone put two fingers up to its non-existent mouth and blew.

*

“It disappeared behind the moon,” George tried to explain as Doctor Branith lent over his shoulder surveying the screen.

“Widen the sweep then!” ordered Doctor Branith. “Search the circumference of the moon in case the ship appears.”

George altered the sweep, although he was fully aware that over such a great distance, the chances of picking up a clear signal of anything smaller than Gibraltar were slim. He was glued to the screen which displayed the moon as a round blue blob in the middle, when a small blip appeared to the right of the moon. Doctor Branith was still peering over his shoulder and immediately pointed at the object.

“What’s that?” he shouted.

George focused the radar to that point to get a clearer signal and printed out a data sheet.

“It appears to be an object, about one hundred metres in length with a mass of approximately two thousand tons and it’s stationary in space above the moon.”

George handed the printout to Doctor Branith, even though George was the only person who could possibly decipher the reams of numbers contained on the perforated A4 sheet of paper. Doctor Branith examined it.

Could this be a mothership? It's definitely too big to be the little ship. Could the potential prize be even greater than I first imagined?

“Keep an eye on that object George,” said Doctor Branith. “I want to know if it moves an inch.”

George was on the verge of explaining that the equipment didn't really possess sufficient sensitivity to determine such a small movement, but thought better of it.

*

If the ugly creature was one of the imbeciles, the Captain had thought as he'd downed a third bottle of Xlab beer, the strongest ale on Throwgus and very likely to paralyse a lesser lifeform, *then he would probably not want any harm to come to them.* He'd witnessed this kind of weak altruistic response in a race of dumb animals on a small moon in the Xrashtianx system five years before. Armed with his new plan, he hurled the empty bottle against the remains of his skull collection and rushed to the bridge. The bridge crew were busy analysing the course of a small object that they'd been tracking. It was too small to be a ship, too slow to be a missile, and if it were a missile then it was going to miss. They'd concluded that it must be a piece of space junk. The gunnery commander had made a bet that he could hit it with an electron pulse without any computer guidance. The rest of the bridge crew had all gathered around his workstation to place bets and the activity was becoming extremely heated. The target was one hundred and sixty thousand kilometres away and it was still moving at a fair pace, so the gunnery commander was going to need all his skill to pull this one off. He was tapping away at his keyboard as his screen showed a flashing dot, representing the target and the cross hairs moved across the screen to meet it. He had to match the speed of the target with the movement of the gun and fire just in front of it, to allow for the split second that the pulse would require to traverse the void of space. He took a deep breath as he lined up the shot. His fat, stubby thumb began to apply pressure onto the highly sensitive firing button, then suddenly the Captain burst

into the bridge, causing the congregation of hopeful punters to scatter indiscriminately around the bridge, leaping to their workstations in a frantic show of action.

“Take the ship to a stationary orbit above the most densely populated city on the planet!” he gurgled without blinking an eye at the obvious chaos surrounding him. The gunnery commander jumped as he made the shot and there was a flash as the electron pulse discharged and missed the target by twenty kilometres.

“What the hell was that?” shouted Flameout.

“No idea.” Pitcher replied. “Could it have been a meteor?”

Meteors don't burn up in space numb nuts, thought Captain Bugsey Buckhannon, resisting the temptation to voice his thought. Nothing more was said on the subject as they continued hurtling through space, blissfully unaware of their close encounter with oblivion.

The bridge on the Throgloid ship became a blur of activity as everyone jumped to their stations and prepared to move the ship into an Earth orbit.

“Then I want it targeted with the plasma burst weapon,” the captain continued.

He left the bridge and stomped towards the hanger bay with renewed vigour, rattling the deck plates as he went. Pardy saw the Captain enter and walk under the ship, running his hand down the underside of the hull. He was grinning in a way that could only be described as disturbing.

“I know that you can hear me in there,” said the Captain. “You have ten seconds to open the ship and give me full control of this, and the larger vessel. If you don't,” his grin widened, virtually dividing his head in two, “I'm going to destroy one major city on the planet below every ten seconds thereafter.” Robbie made a quick calculation. Ten Throgloid seconds were equivalent to three Earth minutes. The Throgloid Captain left the hangar and, with an aura of impending victory about him, rushed back to the bridge.

“Doctor Branith,” called George, “it's moving!”

Doctor Branith hurried across the room and George explained that the object was moving at about half a million kilometres per hour towards the Earth. At that speed it would reach Earth orbit in twenty minutes.

“Should we inform the Secretary of Defence?” asked George.

“Not yet. After all, they didn’t show any signs of hostility before, did they?” He secretly wanted the scoop on this discovery. If he told the Secretary of Defence, then they would take over. *He* wanted to be the one to welcome the aliens to Earth.

“Just keep tracking it.” He patted George on the shoulder but this time he didn’t return to his desk, but hovered, breathing excitedly down George’s neck.

*

Once the bridge of Cranus was secured, the drone had set up a communication link between Robbie and Oli.

“Hello Oli,” said the familiar voice.

“Hey Robbie!” exclaimed Oli. “Great to hear your voice again! How're they treating you over there and how's Pardy?”

“We're both fine,” said Robbie. He then continued to explain the Captain's plan to obliterate a city on Earth every three minutes until they surrendered. They had to get Cranus off the moon and use it to stop them. All that was left to do now was for Oli to initiate the start sequence and they could get to work. Oli sat in the captain’s seat and the computer screens swung into position. He placed his hand on the screen and said “Halibut.” With that, everything lit up and the low throb of the Graviton engines kicked into life. *That’s a good reassuring sound*, thought Oli. *The Throgloids’ days are numbered now.*

“Commander,” said the newly and rather reluctantly appointed number one. “We’ve detected a signal coming from the ship in our hangar. It’s passing through the communications blockade and seems to be directed towards the big ship.”

“What signal? What is it doing? Block it now! Contact the crew on the bridge of the alien ship,” the Captain howled.

“No response, your foulness.”

“The ugly creature is on that ship,” he bellowed. “Prepare to fire at the planet!”

*

“Right-oh Robbie,” said Oli, “let’s go kick some Throgloid butt. Robbie? Robbie? Drone, where’s Robbie?” asked Oli, suddenly feeling very alone again.

The drone lifted its arms and shook its head. It moved to the centre console and interfaced with the communication centre. A message appeared on the screen in front of Oli. He read it out loud.

It would appear that they’ve cut the communication link. We are no longer connected to Robbie.

“Holy oly!” Oli was suddenly beginning to feel a little less than invincible.

Another message appeared on the screen.

We will have to fly the ship manually. We have five minutes before they level a city on Earth.

“Oh crap! We could really do with the rest of the crew right now.”

The drone increased the power to the Graviton drive and the great ship lifted off the ground. Oli watched the screen as the interior walls of the crater passed by, followed by a view of the moon’s surface and the Earth in the distance. The drone was operating the sensors and a small crossed circle appeared on the screen, defining the position of the Throgloid ship. *Head for the cross.* The message appeared on Oli’s screen. Two joystick controls slid out of the arms of the seat. Oli grabbed them and tentatively pushed the left one forward, not wanting to send Cranus careering through the middle of the Earth. The surface of the moon flashed by and, as he became more familiar with the speed control, he gently edged the throttle forward. Soon they were homeward bound.

The Throgloid ship had positioned itself in orbit facing India. They had located the most densely populated city on Earth and it was Mumbai.

“Prepare to fire,” he bellowed.

The Weapons Officer counted down from ten and the blue plasma began to arc across the weapons array on the front of the ship. Five...Four...The Throgloid Captain rubbed his hands with glee as he thought about the millions of pathetic creatures about to be blasted off the face of their worthless little planet. Three...Two...The plasma was filling the screen, with the central targeting spur beginning to

light up. One! Then the blue arc fizzled into nothing and the screen was once again occupied by the ugly planet.

“What do you mean, it’s not working?” bellowed the Captain.

“I mean, I’ve fired the weapon and nothing has happened,” the Weapons Commander said. He was having a very bad day. Firstly, he had lost a month's pay, a secretly-smuggled case of Bog wine and two of his women when he missed the small object, and now the plasma weapon was refusing to fire. He saw the Captain stomping across the bridge towards him, Grax in hand and he picked up his own Grax, which was resting against the console. He put up a good show really, for the three seconds that the fight lasted. He thought at one point that he might actually be in with a chance. But the Captain was too strong and the Weapons Officer lost his head over it.

The Captain sat at the weapons console and initiated the firing sequence for the Plasma burst.

“Targeting...Range...Full power...Fire!”

Nothing. “Targeting...Range...Full power...Fire!”

Nothing. He looked down at the headless corpse and gritted his teeth.

“I see what you mean,” he grunted, merely hinting at an apology.

The remaining handful of micro-drones returned to the little ship, announcing that the mission had been a success and that the plasma weapon was disabled. Robbie had wanted to send the drones into the ship’s engine room and set the Graviton drive to overload. But there was a serious danger that if they did that so close to the Earth, even with the limited power that it possessed, it might push the planet into a wider orbit of the sun, plunging the Earth into an impromptu Ice Age.

*

Oli kept the flashing crosshair in the middle of the screen until he could see the Throgloid ship. They'd seen the plasma weapon lighting up but they had been too far away from the Throgloid ship to do anything. When it failed to fire, he assumed that somehow, Robbie had disabled it and a wry grin formed in the corner of his mouth. The drone had activated the I.R.S, so Oli was able to pull up within one hundred metres of the Throgloid ship without them spotting Cranus.

“I just want to disable them,” said Oli as he fiddled with one of the pulse rifles that the Throgloids had taken, “not blow them out of the sky.”

They couldn't use the Graviton weapon with Robbie still on board, so they had to come up with another plan. The drone adjusted the setting on the rifle and brought up a diagram of the Throgloid vessel on the main screen. A red flashing light indicated where the sensors for the ship were situated. They were located at the front of the ship in a bulb that looked like the knobbly head of a humpback whale. Oli activated the Go-ring and went through a door at the side of the bridge that led to the observation deck.

Meanwhile, the Throgloid Captain was preparing to fire with all the other weaponry at his disposal. He wouldn't be able to completely eradicate the city, but he could certainly kill a few hundred thousand of the pointless little creatures.

Oli walked into the circular glass-domed room and, as he stood in the middle, the floor floated up, placing him just below the dome, looking out over the front of Cranus. Then the glass dome split in the middle, and the two sides folded into the ship. He was now standing on top of the great ship, with the distant Throgloid ship directly in front of him. He shouldered the rifle and the screen on the side of it automatically zoomed in on the target, giving him a clear view of the superstructure. He instantly remembered the time that he had won a goldfish at the fair, for hitting three of the four playing cards with darts. He'd called the goldfish Frog and it had lived for only two days. His mother had suggested, following an honourable toilet funeral, that it would probably have lasted longer if he had taken it out of the plastic bag and put it in a bowl. He started to chuckle and had to lower the rifle while he regained his composure.

Come on Oli, come on Oli, he silently chanted, breaking himself from his reverie.

Commander Grrghracksh was now targeting all the remaining weapons on Mumbai. The console in front of him became an explosion of activity as all the weapons charged, ready to fire. His huge, calloused finger was hovering over the fire button which would launch their full complement of fusion missiles and all thirty banks of beam weapons at the unsuspecting inhabitants below.

Right concentrate now, Oli meditated. *Deep breaths, calm...*

He centred the crosshairs on the bulb and pulled the trigger. There was a flash as the entire bulb and all of the sensor equipment contained within was vaporised, leaving a jagged hole in the roof of the ship. He punched the vacuum with his fist and let out a little “He shoots, he scores!”

The dome folded back over his head and the floor descended into the room.

“What in the name of Krachtach was that?” shouted the Throgloid Captain, as the ship shuddered and the image of Earth disappeared from the screen.

“We’ve lost all our sensors, Captain sir, your foulness,” said the Second-in-Command. “I think something took a shot at us.”

“Return fire now!”

“We can’t, we’re blind.”

“Move us away from here!”

“We can’t, we’re blind.”

“Argggghhhxrash!”

There was a defined absence in volunteers for the newly vacated post of second in command. As the Captain stood in the middle of the bridge, clutching his blood-soaked Grax, then the screen came to life and there, looking very smug indeed, was the ugly creature.

“Hello again,” said Oli. “Release the little ship now and you can go. Continue to be a nob and I’m afraid that I’m going to have to finish you off.”

The Throgloid Captain slumped back in his chair, allowing his Grax to fall to the floor, despairing at the hopeless situation. Oli was watching him on the screen. Suddenly, the Captain looked straight into the screen with a new kind of madness in his evil eyes. They had taken on a strange kind of red glow. He pushed himself out of his chair and without a word walked to one of the consoles. He hurled the operator out of his way and began frantically tapping in commands.

“Uh-oh!” said Oli. “Plot, lost.”

The drone wrote a message that appeared on Oli’s screen.

He's setting the ship's auto destruct. We can't let the Graviton Generator explode this close to Earth.'

A loud claxon began to wail throughout the Throgloid ship, and Oli saw a series of symbols flashing red across the Captain's screen. Oli watched as two Throgloids, who sensing the Captain's weakness, had drawn their mini Graxes and approached him from behind. Unfortunately for them, the Captain had seen their reflection in the main screen. But the two of them kept him busy for a full two minutes, giving Oli a chance to put his plan into action. He moved Cranus closer to the Throgloid vessel and instructed the drone to activate the towing beam.

"How long do we have?"

The reply; *three minutes*, appeared on the main screen. Oli pushed the stick hard over and watched as the Earth swung out of view. The screen was showing the position of the nearest star, so he carried on turning the ship until the sun filled the screen. Then ignoring all the warnings about faster than light travel within a solar system, he punched in the light drive and accelerated to Light 5.

"Where are we going?" asked the drone.

"We're going to dump some rubbish," said Oli.

The idea of killing anything was abhorrent to Oli, but he realised that there was no other way. They knew the location of Earth, they knew about Cranus and they were the biggest bunch of hat stands that he'd ever met. The sun grew in the viewer and the outer edge of the shield began to glow and crackle.

"Can Robbie survive a Graviton explosion inside the sun?" Oli asked.

A row of question marks appeared on the screen, followed by, *never been tried before*.

*

"Not again!" cried Doctor Branith, as George informed him that both objects had simply vanished. He'd almost burst a blood vessel when George had informed him that an even larger object had left the moon and headed towards Earth. *This is it*, he'd thought. *The moment that I've been working towards, all my life*. He was finally going to make contact with an Alien race.

“Broadcast the welcome signal on all frequencies,” he said, tapping George on the shoulder. The welcome signal included coordinates for a landing in the centre of Hyde Park, London. After all, they didn’t want their new alien friends landing on the White House lawn.

*

On the bridge of the Throgloid ship, the Captain had finally defeated his two challengers. With his Grax and a pulse rifle in hand, was hurrying out of the bridge to the nearest escape pod. As he tore down the corridor, pushing his startled crew out of his way, he could hear the countdown of ‘Auto destruct in 20 craggs...19...18...17...’

He began to revel in his glory. Even though he was probably going to die, so was the ugly creature and all his imbecilic little friends. With no sensors available to him, he had no idea that his ship was moving away from the planet and heading for the star. The drone disconnected the towing beam, just one hundred thousand kilometres above the corona of the Sun and Oli brought Cranus to a dead stop. They watched as the Throgloid ship continued its journey towards the sun, rotating diagonally as it drifted out of control. It began to glow and leave a trail of wispy red vapour behind it. Then the shape of the ship disappeared in a fireball which was finally swallowed up by nuclear furnace of the Sun. After a few seconds, the screen lit up with a flash that made even the surface of the sun appear dull by comparison and a huge arc of plasma spurted millions of kilometres into space, causing the most spectacular light show as it was deflected around the ship. On the bridge of Cranus, there was silence.

“Robbie...Robbie?” Oli waited, staring in disbelief at the screen. Robbie wasn’t just a computer, he was his friend. They had fun together, liked the same music and what about poor little Pardy? How was Oli going to break the news to her mother? In fact, how was he going to get back to Annenia without Robbie? A solar flare erupted from the surface and Oli scoured the star for any sign of the little ship. Minutes passed and Oli lifted himself out of his seat and walked to the screen. The shields on Cranus allowed him to peer directly into the flaming heart of the sun. He kept looking back towards the drone, hoping for some encouragement, but all he received in return was the emotionless stare of his mechanoid companion. Oli could feel tears starting to form in his eyes as he accepted the obvious truth that nothing could have survived that explosion. As he searched the morphing corona for

debris, another giant curling solar flare erupted in the middle of the screen and out of it, performing a spitfire victory roll, came the little ship, still glistening as though it had just been through a car wash and not a graviton explosion in the corona of a star.

Oli leapt in the air, with both arms reaching for the ceiling.

“Robbie!” he shouted. “You’re okay!”

“Well of course I am Oli. Sorry if I was a while in there, but Pardy insisted on watching a solar flare from the inside of a star. You weren’t worried, were you?”

Oli turned to face the drone and even though it lacked a face and the musculature ability with which to project emotions, Oli could tell that their thoughts were unified.

CHAPTER 10

MISSION CANCELLED

“Mission control...Mission control, this is Persius.”

Captain O’Connell had the target moon in view and was preparing for the final approach.

“Retro firing now.”

The two men were thrust forward into their harnesses as the rockets fired, slowing the craft to a speed relative to the asteroid. They were now one kilometre above the body. Flameout disengaged the fuel tank and Captain O’Connell fired the thrusters to bring the craft down to the surface. This was the most dangerous part of the mission, if you didn’t take into account being fired at by a Throgloid with a plasma weapon. But of course, they were blissfully unaware of how close they had come to being the first casualties in an inter-planetary war. The landing legs extended from beneath the craft where the fuel tank had previously been slung and the radar screen showed a patch of flat rock directly below. He locked onto this position and the craft slowly approached the surface. 100m...70m...40m...He fired a short burst to slow the descent. 20m...10m...5...4...3...2...1... Clunk! The feet of the capsule hit the rocky surface cushioned by pneumatic pistons and automatically fired bolts to prevent it from drifting away. They didn’t know for certain how much gravity the asteroid would create, but they knew that it would be minimal.

“Touchdown! The eagle has landed.”

Although this wasn’t the official signal to send, Flameout had always dreamt of saying it and felt that under the circumstances, he’d probably get away with it. They prepared themselves for exiting the vehicle and entering history. They donned their helmets and the pressure inside the capsule was released. The entire top section, including the curved window opened and slid to the back of the ship. They both prepared to leave the cockpit. Pitcher had to raise himself from his seat, which was unfeasibly easy. In fact, he had to grasp the metal handle which was positioned to aid his exit, to prevent himself from floating straight up into the airless sky. At this point, he felt it would be prudent

to attach his long harness line which would allow him to move about freely, safe in the knowledge that if he pushed off a bit too forcefully he would only float as far as the cable would allow. With this added feeling of security, he lifted one leg over the edge of the cockpit and climbed down to the waiting rock using the ladder that ran down the side of the craft. As he watched Flameout descending through the corner of his eye, Pitcher opened a hatch in the side of the craft that concealed a compartment, with tools used for collecting rock samples. All the time he was silently praying that Flameout didn't come out with something about this being a small step, or anything similar.

“What the blazes is that?” exclaimed Captain O’Connell.

Flameout had just reached the ground and he turned to see that Pitcher was pointing at a spot, one hundred metres away, where there appeared to be an object on the surface of the asteroid. He lifted his sun visor and squinted into the distance, shielding the sun from his helmet with his hand. It appeared to be a tripod with an object on top.

“Mission control...Persius. We’ve got something here. Moving to investigate.”

The President was listening to the conversation. He’d half expected that they would find something out of the ordinary. In fact, the real mission was not one of retrieving rock samples but finding out who, or what had halted a 58 billion tonne lump of rock as though it were a helium balloon. As the astronauts approached the tripod, bounding along in three metre strides, it became blatantly obvious that the object was not a natural feature of the asteroid. It was clear now that the object perched on top of the tripod was a black sphere. They moved closer.

“Ah...Mission control...Persius. I think someone’s been here already.”

They were standing next to the tripod now and in the interest of science, Captain O’Connell gave the sphere a sharp prod with his clumsily-gloved hand. It appeared to be solid.

“Mission control, we have a sphere on a tripod. I’ve not seen anything like it before. Please advise.”

There was the usual delay when talking over such distances, plus a little extra.

“Persius...Mission control. How large is the object? Will it fit into the compartment on the capsule?”

“Affirmative control. The object will transport.”

He didn't know how heavy it would be when subjected to gravity but it couldn't weigh more than the permitted payload for re-entry of the shuttle.

“You are authorised to collect the device and transport to Olympia.”

Captain O'Connell grasped the sphere with both hands and was surprised when it lifted away from the tripod with very little resistance. Slowly they made their way back to the capsule. The Graviton Generator was placed in a padded corner of the compartment and secured with straps. Then they continued with the secondary task of collecting rock samples.

*

Robbie docked with Cranus and Oli boarded the little ship, where he found a slightly ruffled Pardy, standing on her perch.

“That was exciting,” she said, sounding slightly less than convincing. The blind terror that had overwhelmed her just a short time before was rapidly receding. Robbie took control of Cranus and flew it back to the crater on the far side of the Moon.

“Good to see you again guys,” said Oli, wanting desperately to give Robbie a big hug. But short of hugging the drone and asking it to pass it on, this was not possible.

“I really thought we'd lost you there for a minute.”

Robbie congratulated Oli on his fine shooting and explained that he'd calculated a sixty percent chance of surviving the explosion. He'd immediately checked the orbit of the sun in relation to the rest of the galaxy and calculated a 0.000000476 of a second of arc variation in the course of the star around the galaxy, which would probably correct itself over time. Oli held out his hands silently as if to say ‘and...?’

“No damage,” offered Robbie to a relieved Oli. After all, breaking windows, crashing bikes, or any of the other calamities that usually ensued in the presence of Oli, were insignificant when compared to pushing the sun off its course.

“Oli?” posed Robbie, bringing the air of celebration back to a work-like atmosphere, “when I regained control of Cranus, I was able to monitor a small craft in orbit around Earth. I didn’t want to mention it at the time, but it would appear that the curiosity has got the better of the bat.”

“Are you sure you’re okay Robbie?” enquired Oli. Robbie was well past the point where he made silly errors in Earth sayings.

“Fine thank you. I just think that on closer analysis of the proverb, a bat is a far more inquisitive creature than a cat.”

Oli smiled at Parady, who was still looking a bit shell-shocked. Being attacked by a violent alien race, then being trapped inside an exploding ship and escaping through the corona of a star was, to all intents and purposes, outside the usual daily routine of a parrot.

“Where’s it heading?” asked Oli.

“The shuttle has remained in orbit, but a smaller craft has landed on the asteroid. They have discovered and removed the Graviton Generator.”

“Oops! Would I be correct in assuming that if they took it back to Earth and started prodding it with all manner of prodding implements, that all would not be well?”

“That would depend on whether you consider several billion people floating off into space to be a good or a bad thing I suppose.” Robbie put Cranus to bed and they left in the little ship with all due haste.

*

The two astronauts had spent the last couple of hours gathering samples and it was now time to leave the asteroid and return to the shuttle. Captain O’Connell had placed one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder and with his left hand had reached up to grab the final rung and haul himself up.

“Holy...!” exclaimed a rather open-jawed Pitcher.

Robbie had brought the little ship in to land twenty metres away from the capsule, behind Captain O’Connell. Pitcher was already in the cockpit. Flameout shot his head round to see what had startled his partner, but all he could see was the inside of his helmet. In an effort to turn his whole body on the

ladder, he lost his footing and went into a rather graceful, slow motion barrelling spin towards the rock.

“Mission control...Persius. Something big and black has just landed next to us and I don't think it's one of ours.”

Pitcher waited thirty seconds for the response, by which time Flameout had reached the surface and was doing a passable impression of an overturned beetle.

“Mission control...Persius. Are you receiving?”

A hatch started to open on the underside of the alien craft and a ramp slowly extended to the surface. Both sets of eyes were fixed on the top of the ramp, one of them from a lying down position, waiting for an almost certain first contact with an alien race. Flameout's mind was racing. *Famous or dead. Or famous and dead. Or dead famous.* They all included being famous, so that was acceptable. *Would it be humanoid, or would it be some slimy, indescribable blob of silicate, that would slide down the ramp and envelope him in a final and rather messy embrace?* Pitcher's mind was occupied with the conclusion that peeing in a space suit makes for an uncomfortable experience. Whilst all these thoughts were flying through their brains, at the top of the ramp a pair of red high-heeled shoes on the end of two extremely shapely legs appeared.

“Ugnh?” they grunted in unison.

Then the mini skirt appeared, above which flirted a bare midriff.

“What the...?”

As the pink crop top and red hair emerged, Flameout rolled over to look up at Pitcher, held out both his hands in the gesture version of *Ugnh* then rolled back over to see the young woman nonchalantly walking towards him.

“Sorry about the surprise entrance gentlemen,” Roberta said in her finest Irish lilt, “but I'm going to have to take that sphere that you found. Can I give you a hand up?” The drone held out a hand towards Flameout, who accepted graciously and was lifted to his feet.

“Now believe me, I know you have a million questions, but I cannot answer any of them, so don't bother asking, okay?”

With that, the drone walked over to the hatch on the side of the capsule.

“In here is it?” she said, pointing at the compartment and tilting her head to peer around the capsule. She looked between the two rather confused pilots. No response was forthcoming, so she opened the door and saw the Generator tucked into the corner. She released the retaining straps and lifted it out, fixing it under her arm like a rugby ball.

“Say ‘hi’ to the president from me guys. Keep up the good work.” And with a cheery wave and that plutonium-melting Roberta smile, the drone headed back to the ship. The two men watched in incredulity, as she glided up the ramp and stopped at the top to send them a somewhat patronising thumbs up, then the ramp folded away and the door closed. They watched in disbelief as the ship silently lifted off, lacking any engine noise or plumes of dust, and in the blink of an eye, it disappeared.

Pardy had already fallen off her perch and was rolling around the floor, emitting uncontrollable squawks of laughter, and Oli was holding his sides as though his most vital organs were about to spill out all over the floor.

“Did...did...did you see their faces Robbie? That was priceless.”

Whilst Robbie could fully understand the amusement contained in the situation, and totally understood the Human need to laugh at one another’s misfortune, he couldn’t quite communicate that understanding in the same way as Oli and Pardy.

“Yes Oli. Extremely amusing.”

*

“Persius...Persius...Mission control. Do you copy?”

“Yes...Yes...I mean...Ah, loud and clear.”

“We lost you for a while there Persius. Is everything okay?”

“Ah...Yes...Everything is fine.” Pitcher held up a hand to prevent Flameout from saying anything. He switched off the transmit button and turned to Flameout, who was stepping into the cockpit.

“Well, what do you want me to say? A stunningly beautiful woman in a mini skirt and high heels just came and took the sphere, then flew off in a big black space ship? I personally would like to

continue my career and I think we should come up with something slightly less pensionable than that.”

“But she ha...” burbled Flameout

“Shh! It didn’t happen, right? I don’t want to hear it ever again, it JUST...DIDN’T...HAPPEN!”

The capsule lifted away from the surface and when it reached a distance of one kilometre, Pitcher used the thrusters to point the craft towards Earth and the countdown started for the burn.

5...4...3...2...1...

“Why are we still here?” asked Pitcher.

“The engines haven’t fired.”

“Try again”

5...4...3...2...1...

“Mission control, we have a problem. The engines will not ignite for main burn. Please advise!”

The wait for a reply seemed considerably longer than usual.

“Persius...mission control. Re-route power from thrusters to main engine ignition coil and try again.”

Pitcher followed the command, using the cockpit computer interface, and hit the fire button again.

“Mission control...Persius...Still no ignition...Please advise.”

“Erm...Pitcher,” Flameout was furiously tapping Pitcher on the shoulder. “They’re back!”

Flameout was looking up open jawed, through the cockpit window at the dark underside of the alien craft as it passed overhead, no more than three metres above them. It came to a halt and a door, about the same length as Persius, opened above their heads. The capsule moved into the opening and as they passed through the outer section of the hull and into a room, they felt their own bodyweight sink into the seats.

Gravity? thought Pitcher.

A door opened in the wall in front of them and in walked the red-haired Irish woman. She sauntered over to the cockpit window, and without the legs extended from the capsule, placed their heads at about boob-tube height.

“I noticed you having a spot of trouble with your little spaceship, so I thought I’d give you a ride. Can I fetch you anything to drink? Coffee? Tea? Something a bit stronger maybe?”

Oli and Pardy were watching the scene from the bridge and had to stifle their laughter in case the men heard them through the open door. The sight of the two bamboozled men sitting helplessly in their little toy spaceship, looking up at the drone was too much to handle.

“I would suggest that you stay where you are. We’ll only be a few minutes and you can rejoin your friends on the other ship.”

Robbie jammed the radar and came in behind and underneath the shuttle. The two men hadn’t uttered a word. They just sat there looking up at the flame red hair of...of...of what, they didn’t know.

“Ah. Here we are. So I’ll be wishing you farewell. It’s been a pleasure meeting you both.”

With a wiggle and a wave she was gone, and they were dropped back into outer space, barely one hundred metres from the shuttle.

“Persius...Persius...Mission control. Sorry about the delay, but we think we may have located the fault.”

“Ah, mission control...Persius...scrub that last communication...We’re here.”

“Where?”

“Here, at the rendezvous point with Olympia.”

“Persius...Mission control...please repeat last communication.”

“We’re here at the shuttle. One hundred metres below it to be more precise. Please don’t ask how just yet.”

“Mission control...Shuttle Olympia. We can confirm the arrival of Persius and are commencing retrieval sequence.”

The journey back to Earth was a silent one. Whenever one of the crew questioned the two men about their unbelievable journey, they were told; “We hitched a ride with a beautiful woman.” Back on Earth, they had no other choice other than to come clean and relay their incredible story about the alien ship and the taking of the sphere. There was just one detail that they omitted, and that was concerning the leggy Irish redhead. The two of them made a pact that as long as they lived, they

would keep that part to themselves. Instead, they reported a humanoid alien who was covered with a spacesuit.

“We’d better get you home then Pardy,” said Oli. “Your mum and sister are gonna be worried sick. We’ll take Cranus. It’ll be quicker and I want to check on our Annenian friend. Any news, Robbie?”

“I’m afraid not Oli. The drones have taken blood samples, and have confirmed that she is infected with the virus and they are working around the clock to find a cure.”

They docked with Cranus and prepared to leave for Annenia. Oli immediately called the rest of the crew to let them know how the battle with the Throgloids had played out. They all wanted to come with him to Annenia, so he sent Robbie back to Earth to pick them up from the usual spot. Oli stayed on board Cranus to check on the young Annenian. With Robbie gone and Pardy sleeping in the control room, he felt completely alone on the cavernous ship. As he walked through the cargo bay to collect one of the hover bikes, suddenly, for the first time, he realised the scale of the ship and started looking all around, trying to take it all in at once.

“Hello!” he shouted.

“Hello...Hello...Hello,” replied the echo.

He decided that he didn’t want to spend too much time on his own. It was definitely more fun with a crew and his mate Robbie. He found a bike and headed off to the far end of the ship and the medilab. He stood over her hibernation capsule and stared at the misty outline of the Annenian's body.

“Don’t worry my friend, we’ll find a cure,” he whispered, running his hand over the glass above her face. It was probably just the mist on the inside of the pod, but she looked angelic.

When the others arrived, Oli hopped on his bike and joined them on the bridge. They were all eager to hear the story of the battle, so Oli started the ship and they headed for the observation dome to watch the sun as they flew passed it, travelling close to light speed. Robbie took them extra close and, as the sun became brighter, the glass dome grew darker and darker so that they could look straight into the heart of the sun. A general wow of approval came from the crew as they watched the flares erupting from the surface of the star causing streaks of plasma to arc around the domed force field.

With the passing of the sun, they went straight to the bar area and spent the next two hours relaying every detail of the battle. Pardy had woken up with all the commotion on the bridge and was very keen to share her experiences as a captive on board the Throgloid vessel. She became very animated, her wings flapping as she described the horrors. As she conveyed the tale of the unfortunate Throgloid Captain being messed around by Robbie, everyone clapped and laughed approvingly. They hadn't slept for about a day and a half, so even considering their over-excited state, they retired to the closest quarters near the bar and slept soundly while Cranus hurtled through nulspace.

When they awoke they were refreshed and ready for a huge breakfast. Oli didn't want to disturb Robbie, who judging by the images on the mainframe screen on the bridge, was involved in an unusually tricky game of four-dimensional galactic Larssy, so they collected a hover bike each and went to the rear of the ship. Situated on the next deck up from the medilab was a large room with hundreds of tables and chairs. At the far end of the room occupying an entire wall was a larger version of the food dispenser on the little ship. They all asked for an English fried breakfast or something similar, and Pardy had a bowl of assorted seeds. The breakfast was definitely improving. The bacon was almost bacon but as everyone knows, the only baked beans are Heinz baked beans and they still contained a faint flavour of turpentine. As they finished their breakfast, Jay noticed in the other corner of the room, several arcade-style game consoles. He hurriedly gulped down the last of his non-descript fruit juice and went to investigate.

“Hey Oli,” he shouted, “come and check this out.”

Oli walked over to where Ed was examining a work desk and screen with a reclining chair attached to it. The work desk had several different coloured buttons, an Annenian keypad and an NFS hanging from a hook on the screen. He sat down and placed the NFS on his temples. At once, the screen lit up with Annenian symbols. There were about fifty moving characters on the screen with writing under each one. But this time he knew exactly what they meant. The neural feed set was instantly interpreting the images into English inside his brain, as if he'd been reading the Annenian language since he was a child. He read through the images from the top left.

“What does it say?” asked Pardy, hopping up and down on his shoulder.

“Main drive-Course-Life support-Larssy-Trance music.” Oli continued to read down the list, pointing to each one as he read it. “This is a monitor of all the things that Robbie’s up to at the moment, a sort of task bar.” He continued to read. “Cleaning-Maintenance-Mission status.” He paused. “Mission status? I like the sound of that one.”

He leant forward and touched the character on the screen. Another page opened with two headings. Mission parameters and mission status. He pressed the mission parameters character and started to read out loud the contents of the page.

“Part one: The artificial intelligence unit Axima Keta 1077/328 will remain hidden beneath the stone monument until such time, as the race of beings known as Hamans, have reached an evolutionary state in concordance with section 845–832 of the development of new life forms programme. The time period given for this development will be twelve thousand orbits of the planets star.

Part two: The test of the beings advancement will be assessed by their ability to stop the asteroid that has been set on a collision course with the planet, ETA twelve thousand years. Holy Oly. *They* did it. The Annenians sent the asteroid to Earth to wipe us out if we hadn’t become bright enough to stop it.”

“Assholes!” squawked Pardy. Oli turned his head to look at her, eyebrows raised in a school teacher manner. “Well that’s a pretty asshole thing to do isn’t it?” she said, looking slightly embarrassed by her outburst.

“Yeah, I know Pardy. I’ve never heard you swear though.”

“No Oli. You’ve never heard me swear in your language before. Read on!” she said, pointing a wing tip at the screen and staring straight passed Oli’s head.

“Part three: On passing the test, all knowledge of the Annenian race will be handed over to the Hamans and the artificial intelligence unit Axima Keta 1077/328 will assist in the further development of the beings. Under no circumstance should Axima Keta 1077/328 influence the development of the beings before such time.”

Oli paused for a second to take it in and a smile appeared in the corner of his mouth. “He broke the rules. Cool!”

“Have a look at what it says in mission status Oli,” said Ed.

Oli pressed the top of the screen and a new page came up with one word on it in flashing red writing. Oli started to laugh.

“What does it say?” they all shouted in one voice

Oli hesitated as he laughed at the single word on the screen.

“It says...CANCELLED!”

“So, if I read this right, Robbie was given a job to do, broke most of the programming right from the start and in the end decided to take the whole matter into his own virtual hands. But why me? Why did he need me? I’ve been wondering this right from the start. He could’ve done everything on his own with the drones.”

“Do you know what I reckon?” said Sara, using the full power of her woman’s intuition. “Twelve thousand years is a long time to spend on your own and if he’s as much of a thinker as this makes him out to be, then I believe that he was lonely.”

“I asked him that when I first came on board and he said...” Oli put on a metallic monotone voice, “twelve thousand earth years was only three thousand two hundred and forty Annenian years, so it wasn’t really that long.”

“Yeah right. He was lonely,” emphasised Sara.

“Let’s go up to the bridge and wind him up,” said Oli.

They jumped on the bikes and headed for the bridge. Following a couple of circuits of the cargo bay race track, initiated by Oli overtaking Ed and nearly bumping him into a bulkhead, they finally reached their destination. The door opened and they were confronted by a mass of unintelligible images on the main screen. One second, a galaxy was spinning at an incredible rate, the next, it zoomed into a certain part of the galaxy and did something weird before it shot back out again. The whole thing was covered in images of Annenian characters darting about, disappearing and morphing into other shapes. None of the crew had any idea what they were witnessing.

“Great light show,” said Oli.

They sat down, dimmed the lights and watched the screen for half an hour, trying to make any sense of the game that Robbie was playing, until Oli could wait no longer.

“Ah...Robbie!”

“Oh Tizak! Not again.”

The image of the galaxy started to swirl out of control and disappeared into a central black hole, like water down a plughole.

“Or should I say Axima Keta 1077/328?” Oli gave Pardy a glance, trying not to grin.

“What?” asked Robbie, displaying an anxiety that Oli had never heard before.

“So you’ve heard that name before have you?” asked Oli.

“No. Never...No...Ah...Yes. Damn this Fashkh truth chip. Where did you hear it?”

“Oh, I can’t do this guys. I hate to see a grown artificial life form squirm. We know all about it Robbie. The mission parameters, the asteroid, the rule breaking and, to be perfectly honest, we’re disgusted at you. I mean, what kind of computer breaks its own program and goes about doing exactly what it wants?” Oli was completely rubbish at lying, but he managed to put on his stern voice and, through gritted teeth, prevented himself from smiling.

“Well, I couldn’t just sit by and watch it happen. I’d grown fond of you all, for all your faults. I know that Humans aren’t ready yet for the Annenian technology, but I’ve put a lot of work into it and I wasn’t prepared to throw it away on a...” There was a long moment of silence. “You’re working me, aren’t you?”

They all erupted with laughter.

“Of course we are,” said Oli after he’d stopped the tears from rolling down his cheek.

“What you did is brilliant. We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you. The whole human race owes you a big hug and I just hope that one day they get their act together and can appreciate everything that they have.”

“There’s just one thing I don’t understand.”

“What’s that, Oli?”

“Why would the Annenians go to the trouble of creating the human race, only to destroy it if it didn’t come up to scratch?”

“Well Oli, apart from their ability to party till the Beluvian Burr Beasts came home, they were a very logical people and they didn’t want to leave a legacy that was unrepresentative of their own perfection. But I got to thinking, *what the hell?* They’re not around to see it anyway.”

“Now, I want you to tell me the truth here Robbie.”

“I have to Oli.”

“This doesn’t have any effect on finding a cure for the virus so we can wake up the Annenian girl does it? I mean you’re not worried about any repercussions if she learns that you’ve disobeyed orders are you?”

“Hardly Oli. After all, I think she’s got considerably more to answer for.”

“How do you mean?”

“The genetic test that I carried out on her blood has identified her as a certain Shtelar, the scientist and all round lover of wildlife.”

“The one that brought the parrot back to Annenia?”

“The very same. So you see, if she wants to throw that particular rock at me, then I think that she would do well to step outside that extremely small greenhouse. Capiche?”

When they arrived in orbit around Annenia, they left Cranus and made the final part of the journey in the little ship. On arriving at the parrot city, they were given the greatest welcome that the parrot civilisation had ever bestowed upon anyone. They threw a great feast with music and dancing in the stadium, and Pardy was given the honour of standing in the VIP box, where she recounted over a very long three hours, the stories of her adventure. The crew decided to stay on Annenia for a few days to explore the great city and salvage any pieces of machinery that might be of some use in furthering their new careers. The lower part of the city was largely overgrown and inaccessible, but they discovered that they could land on the roofs of the taller buildings and descend into them. One such building turned out to be a museum, where they spent hours learning about the early Annenian

civilisation. Tucked away in the basement of this building, they stumbled across the Annenian equivalent of a motor museum crammed with classic cars and hover bikes. Every one of these museum pieces looked like futuristic vehicles to the group of earthlings, but one in particular caught Ed's eye.

“Oh...my...dawg!” he exclaimed, beckoning the others to join him. “I think I'm in love.”

The object of his desire was an open-top car with two seats in the front and just enough room in the back in which to squeeze three good friends. The lack of wheels seemed to indicate either that the owners had left it parked in Peckham for the night or that it was a...*HOVER CAR!* The dark blue bodywork was so dark, that it was almost black and the shine that had been achieved on the paintwork was so deep that it was like staring into the infinity of space. The sleek lines made a Lamborghini look like a Citroen 2CV in comparison. Ed was already sitting in the driver's seat when everyone else arrived to admire his find. He was clutching the controls and grinning like a grinning thing. It didn't have a wheel as you would expect to find in an Earth car, but a horizontal bar with two handgrips either side. He'd already discovered that he could push the control column forward and pull it back towards his lap. *This must be the pitch control*, he thought. *I wonder how high it can go.* Oli looked around the bodywork for a door, but there was no sign of a handle or even a join in the seamless lines of the car, so he hopped over the top into the passenger seat. The dashboard encompassed a jet black, curved screen, which was completely blank. Oli started pressing buttons, attempting to spark some life into the ancient hot-rod, but it was as dead as a Throglid First Officer.

“Robbie,” shouted Oli, gesturing towards the drone.

“Ahh...” said Robbie as the drone arrived, sounding almost excited, “the Gravon 360. A classic of its time; semi-intelligent computer guidance; cruising speed of 300 kilometres per hour, with the ability to reach an altitude of ten thousand metres; with the roof up of course.”

“Does it work?” Ed inquired eagerly.

The drone sent a finger into the dashboard, which returned thirty seconds later.

“I'm afraid the power supply, a very basic fission reactor, has long since passed away,” explained Robbie, with a tone of disappointment in his voice.

“But if we can get it back to Cranus, I’m sure we can find a way to spark some life into the old girl.”

They located a service elevator that went all the way to the landing pad on the roof. The only problem was transporting the car to the lift. Everyone was looking around for a suitable trolley or hover platform when suddenly an arm fell off the drone and landed with a thud on the floor. Julie screamed and instantly hid her head in her hands. The arm split into four equal piles of shimmering gloop. Each separate puddle slid across the floor and disappeared under the car. Everyone leaped out and watched as the car slowly raised itself a few millimetres off the floor.

“You can push it now,” said the one-armed drone. They all moved to the long sleek bonnet and as one, leant into it expecting a massive weight. The car immediately slid across the floor at great speed and everyone landed flat on their fronts. Oli looked up to see the car heading towards the closed lift doors and shouted “STOP!” Just as the car was about to smash into the lift, it magically came to a halt and rested back on the floor.

“A little shove would have been sufficient,” said Robbie to the line of prostrate floor dwellers. There was a definite smirk in his voice, indicating that finally, he might have discovered the joy of Schadenfreude. They loaded the car into the lift and rode with it to the roof of the museum, then pushed it gently, to the waiting ship. It fitted perfectly into the cargo bay and everyone stood around admiring it. The following day, after a night of partying at the Parrot Stadium, they said their farewells. The entire parrot city came out to wave them off, and the next minute they were aboard Cranus, heading back to Earth. Pardy’s aunty, the premier, was so impressed with her tale of their adventures, that she gave her blessing for Pardy to continue with her dream, on one condition; that she would return every few months to entertain the population with more tails of daring feats and crazy shenanigans.

The journey home was fairly subdued. No crazy races or spectacular spacewalks; they just sat for hours on end discussing potential plans for the Annenian treasure. Everyone was in full agreement. They definitely couldn’t hand the technology over to the human race, even though most of them were

members of that particular club. If they used the little ship too often within the Earth's atmosphere, then Doctor David Branith and his team would certainly home in on them.

"We'll have to choose our disasters carefully," said Sara, with more than a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Robbie could hide the ship in the smuggler's cave under Stephan's uncle's house in Cornwall. But who would move down to the West Country to be *on call*? Oli and Ed had always dreamed of moving down to Cornwall but never had the impetus to take the first step.

"I suppose we could ask Stephan if his uncle would mind us renting a room or two," suggested Ed, trying hard to hide the ever-expanding grin which was making its way across his face. Oli didn't need to reply; the identical grin covering the breadth of his face said it all. If they possessed the same telepathic abilities as their forefathers, they would have realised that they were both thinking of endless surfing all year round, and when it was blown out, they could go gallivanting around the cosmos. Sara couldn't stand the sight of these two idiots grinning at each other and so she announced without consultation that she and Julie would also move to Cornwall. After all, why should the boys have all the fun?

"Well," interrupted Jay, "I suppose I could put my glittering career as a second-rate London accountant on hold for a few years, or until the human race grows up a bit. Whichever comes first," he added, mockingly looking skywards for inspiration.

They agreed that they should move Shtelaar from Cranus to the little ship so that the drones could continue their search for a cure. As for Cranus; well, where were they going to hide such a massive object? There were so many probes buzzing around the moon that someone would be bound to spot it sooner or later, even on the dark side. They thought about Mars, but there were even more research probes mapping every inch of that planet in preparation for the potential manned mission. The gas giants, such as Saturn and Jupiter, were out of the question, because Cranus would have to be powered down and could not survive the massive pressures on those planets without a force field to protect it. In fact, there were no planets or moons that were free from Earth's scrutiny. Just then, Oli had a rare moment of clarity.

“We hide it behind the sun in an exact mirror orbit to the Earth! Unless someone jumps off the Earth and sits in space waiting for it to come around, it’ll never be seen.” He held his hands out as though he were waiting to gather in all the praise that would surely be bestowed upon him. The crew thought about it for a while and slowly, one by one as the simplicity of the idea sank in, they began a slow handclap, nodding their heads in approval.

“We can drop it off on the way back, set it in orbit and head for home in the little ship,” Oli continued, making full use of his moment.

“Well, good lord Mr Big Brain,” said Robbie, “I’ll soon have a partner for four-dimensional Larssy.”

They all laughed out loud, quite taken aback at the rather wooden attempt at sarcasm.

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On their approach to Earth, Robbie announced that Dr Branith and his team were scouring the skies, so landing anywhere near London was out of the question. So they came in low across the Atlantic and flew straight at the cliff below Stephan’s uncle’s house. They had called Stephan, who was still there and he was in the smugglers cave waiting for them when they arrived. No one got any sleep that night as Oli recounted the adventures to Stephan, who like everyone else on Earth, had no idea about the close call with the Throgloids.

The next day was a perfect autumn day with a glassy two metre swell rolling in from an Atlantic low pressure system, so they borrowed some boards from the local surf shop and headed for the beach. Stephan was not kidding about being a bit rusty, but as the day progressed, they all ended up riding the waves along with the seal-like locals.

The following day they caught the train to London and started packing their belongings. Stephan’s uncle had agreed to let them live at the house. He never went there any more, so it would be good to know that the old place was getting some use again. When Oli asked him how much rent he wanted, the old man just said, “keep the place looking nice lad and we’ll call it quits.”

They rented a van to move their meagre possessions to Cornwall and by the end of the week, were eating scones and cream in their new local. None of them had any particular plan or a rock solid agenda; they would simply ride the newly forming waves and see where they took them.

There were only a few local fishermen in the village pub and the portly owner was leaning on the bar watching the television that hung from an extending bracket above the fireplace. Sky News was breaking a story about an oil super tanker that had been rammed by another ship and was taking on water fast. Oli and the crew were drawn to the screen as the reporter stated that they hadn't yet received any reports of oil leaking into the ocean, but if the tanker broke up and sank, it would release eighty four million gallons of crude oil into the middle of the Atlantic. "The ship," continued the reporter, "is positioned two thousand kilometres from any land and this presents the added problem that no ships are close enough to rendezvous and off-load the oil."

"Oh bugger," grunted one of the fishermen, "and who's gonna 'ave to clean it up when it washes ashore 'ere?"

The men suddenly looked over their shoulders as the door to the pub slammed shut. The five young folk who'd recently moved into the manor house on top of the hill had left the pub in such a hurry that they hadn't even finished their drinks.

"Youngsters today," said the owner, "always in a rush to do bugger all."