

The Taylor Pennysworth
Detective Agency

Book 1: Planet X

by Jamie Harbison

I dedicate this first book to my sons Taylor and Cameron. Their enthusiasm for the stories has been inspirational. I would also like to thank my nephews Michael and Matthew. You boys have all been wonderful! Thanks for your support and encouragement.

Furthermore, I would like to dedicate this to The Ganesh Project for promoting reading and literacy for children around the world.

www.theganeshproject.org

The right of James Paul Harbison to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted. All rights reserved. All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. This book cannot be used for commercial purposes without the written permission of the author.

Chapter 1

“Oh no!” groaned Nick, looking at his Monday morning timetable. “We’ve got double Hippobottomus first thing!”

“What?” whined Bill. “You sure?”

“Yep,” said Nick, pointing to the slip of card they had been given at the start of term.

Mr. Hipobaum was the Year Five Geography teacher at the St. Thomas School in Kent. He had small beady eyes, buck-teeth and looked rather like a hippopotamus, hence his rather unfortunate nickname.

“Don’t you think he’s been acting a little strangely lately, like he’s about to erupt or something?” Nick asked.

“Volcanic, definitely,” agreed Bill as they made their inevitable way to the worst possible start to anyone’s week of school.

William J. Pennysworth, or just plain Bill, was Nick Taylor’s best friend. They had grown up together and were once next door neighbours. Bill’s father was the county crossword champion and had made him sleep with a dictionary under his pillow as a baby. This was an effort to make his son as brilliant with words as he was. Bill insists it didn’t work but even aged just nine, he was already an expert in words ending with *nic*. He used them at every available opportunity, usually just to annoy Nick.

It was their ambition to become private investigators when they grew up, and they were going to call it The Taylor Pennysworth Detective Agency. The two of them could no more resist a mystery than miss dinner or an episode of Columbo.

As they walked into the classroom, Mr. Hipobaum was frantically rubbing the blackboard clean. His pudgy little fingers were a blur as the duster sent clouds of chalk billowing above his head. The class filed in slowly, none of them seemed particularly happy to be there.

“Right, sit down class.” Mr. Hipobaum said quickly. “Open your books and revise for your end-of-term test.” Which was a strange thing to say, since it was only October. Mr. Hipobaum returned to his desk and picked up a rather heavy looking book, completely forgetting that he was in the middle of cleaning the blackboard. Quite happy to be ignored by their teacher, the children got out comics and reading books and chatted amongst themselves. Nick threw Bill a puzzled look as if to say *What’s up with him?* Nick just shrugged his shoulders and sat down.

After a while, Nick, who had been watching the teacher very carefully, turned to Bill.

“I don’t like this,” he said in a whisper.

“Don’t be so moronic, what’s not to like?” said Bill. “If it goes on like this, we’ve got a double free period first thing every Monday!”

“It’s too good to be true,” said Nick. “Something strange is going on.”

“You are such a cynic!” said Bill with a deep sigh. Nick couldn’t help but smile. Even though it was sometimes annoying, Bill really was amazing with his *nic* words.

When the lesson finally ended, the pupils streamed out of the classroom. Mr. Hipobaum hardly noticed any of them leave. Nick waited until everyone else had left before he tiptoed up to the teacher’s desk, determined to get a peek at what he was up to. Mr. Hipobaum was flicking furiously through what turned out to be an encyclopaedia, unaware that one of his pupils was standing only a few feet away.

“Ahem!” coughed Nick loudly.

Mr. Hipobaum got such a fright that it made him slam his nose in the massive book.

“Yowch!” he squealed, dropping the book onto his desk. A bookmark with the words ‘Operation Nibiru—Planet X’ scrawled across it, fluttered to the floor. Nick peered at it curiously but Mr. Hipobaum snatched it up before Nick could read any more.

“Get out of here, you nosy little menace!” shouted Mr. Hipobaum.

“What’s Planet X, sir?” asked Nick politely.

“None of your business, boy!” came the curt reply.

“But sir,” insisted Nick.

“Get out before I report you to Captain ... er Mr. Vini ... I mean Mr. Winiger!” thundered Mr. Hipobaum, stamping his foot. Nick hurried out of the door and ran after his classmates who were on their way to the next lesson.

Nick caught up to Bill and told him about the encounter. He had his best friend’s full attention now.

“Planet X, how intriguing!” exclaimed Bill.

“Very,” said Nick, his eyes wide with excited curiosity.

“I guess we’ll have to keep a close eye on him then,” said Bill.

And that is exactly what they did.

Chapter 2

During their lunch break that afternoon, Nick and Bill spotted their Geography teacher sneaking off across the playing field, clutching a battered brown briefcase tightly to his chest. He was heading in the direction of the shed, where the school buses were kept. The boys quickly scooped down their sandwiches and followed him. From a distance, it sounded like Mr. Hipobaum was humming a tune to himself. He was too far away for them to identify it clearly. When they reached the shed, they hid behind a bush just outside the entrance where they saw Mr. Hipobaum trying to open a padlock. His hands were shaking so much with excitement that he was fumbling badly. What he was excited about, the boys could only guess. A little closer to him now, they could make out the words to the rhyme he was singing.

“Is that *When you wish upon a star?*” asked Bill quietly.

“It sure is. The same words over and over,” whispered Nick. “How weird.”

Mr. Hipobaum eventually got the door open and after a cautious glance over his shoulder, slipped through as elegantly as his enormous bulk would allow. Ever curious, the boys crept up to the grimy window that was slightly open and peered in. They could still hear him singing that silly nursery rhyme as they watched him open a small metal box that was fixed to the far wall.

“Isn’t the school shed out of bounds to pupils?” said a deep voice suddenly behind them. They spun around quickly only to see their Headmaster, Mr. Winiger towering above them. “What are you doing here?” he asked sternly.

“Er, nothing sir,” mumbled Nick, looking down at his shoes.

“We um, thought we saw a rabbit and we followed it here?” offered Bill. It was weak but the best he could do for an excuse on such short notice.

“Well, you two best go and join your classmates and don’t ever let me catch you sneaking around here again,” warned the Headmaster.

Nick and Bill hurried off, relieved but somewhat surprised that they didn’t get into more trouble.

“That was close!” said Bill, a little breathless.

“I know,” said Nick “But the question is, what was he doing there?”

“He was opening a metal box,” replied Bill. “Didn’t you see?”

“No, I mean the Headmaster,” said Nick. “Mr. Winiger.”

“I wonder ...” said Bill. “If it involves him, it must be big.”

“Yes, Titanic!” said Nick, very pleased with himself for once in his life beating Bill at his little *nic* game.

-∞-

When the final bell of the day dismissed the students, Nick asked Bill if he could sleep over at his house that night.

“Of course you can mate, I’ll just have to ask my Mom. Got something up your sleeve, haven’t you?” asked Bill on the way to the courtyard. It was thronging with chattering parents who had come to fetch their children. Even though Bill lived around the corner from the school, his Mom still came to walk him home every day. It gave her a chance to chat to Audrey, Nick’s mother.

“Of course I have but I’ll tell you later,” Nick whispered when they got there.

Their mothers were used to the two of them sleeping at each other's houses and thankfully didn't mind this time either.

Mrs Pennysworth was making spaghetti bolognaise from the Jamie Oliver recipe book she got for her birthday that year. It had ground nutmeg sprinkled over the top and everything. It was delicious. Mr. Pennysworth described it using very long words like 'superbly palatable' and 'astonishingly delectable'. Bill's little sister Emmy, who was only three, tried to copy her father's words but they came out like 'bubbly bubble-able' and 'polishy bu-lickable' which made everyone at the table laugh. After dinner, the two boys went up to Bill's room to set up the sleeper couch for Nick.

"So, what's your plan Mr. Taylor?" asked Bill.

Nick replied with a question of his own, "You got a torch?"

"Oh boy, we're going back to the school tonight, aren't we?" said Bill with a sigh, knowing perfectly well that they were.

"We have to find out what old Hippobottomus is hiding and I'll bet my Dragon-Master pendent it's in that shed."

They waited for Bill's parents to go to sleep before they snuck out. They both knew that students could get expelled for being in the school grounds at night but the allure of a mystery was too strong. They cautiously approached the shed they had seen Mr. Hipobaum enter earlier that day. Sodium lamps cast a sickly orange-yellow glow over the grounds and they had to be careful to stick to the shadows. Because they did not have a key for the padlock, they wriggled through the open shed window and crouched in the semi-darkness. They waited for a few moments, listening for any sign that they had been seen. Nobody came running, nobody came shouting. They were safe, for now.

Chapter 3

As quietly as they could, Nick and Bill crawled across the dusty shed floor towards the metal box. There was an overwhelming musty smell that, mixed with odours of oil and grease, seemed to make the air as thick as sour custard. They could almost taste the rancid diesel fumes. The floor was made of set concrete and was icy beneath their knees and on the palms of their hands.

Suddenly, a very large spider scurried over Bill's outstretched fingers, and made him shout in fright. He shot up and sent a tin of paint from the shelf next to him clattering to the ground. They both froze. After waiting for nearly a full minute in total silence, Bill let out a sigh of relief. Luckily, the sudden noise had not aroused anyone. They crossed the rest of floor and reached the box on the far wall. The light from outside did not reach that far into the shed so it was safe for them to stand to their full height.

"Pass me the torch," whispered Nick.

Bill handed the torch to Nick who flicked it on but quickly shut it off again. The caretaker only lived about a hundred yards from the shed and Nick did not want to tempt fate again. Having found the box, Nick gently flipped it open and was quite surprised by what he found. Dimly lit buttons were set into a plastic panel that looked like a futuristic telephone keypad. It had the same numbers and letters as a normal telephone but it was very cleverly disguised in the old metal box on the wall. Nick just stared at it, uncertain what to do next.

"What do you think?" he asked.

“It may be some sort of coded entry,” suggested Bill, leaning so close that his nose was almost touching the keys.

“Great! So what is the code then, genius?” asked Nick, not happy about the dead end they had run into.

“Don’t be so sardonic,” said Bill. “There is no such thing as an unsolvable mystery. You taught me that.”

Nick made a mental note to look up ‘sardonic’ in the dictionary when he got home. This was no time for explanations. Suddenly Nick had an idea.

“Can you see which buttons have been pressed?” he asked.

“Well, the 1 and the 3 look a bit dustier than the others,” said Bill. “They obviously haven’t been pressed recently so we can rule them out.”

“Yes,” agreed Nick, looking even closer. “Well spotted. It looks like the only ones that have been pressed are the 2, the 8 and the 9.”

Nick tried a few combinations of those numbers but all he got was a series of three soft beeps after every six buttons he pressed.

“So then, the code has to be six digits long,” noticed Nick, biting his lip and thinking hard.

“Hmnn... and it has to include the numbers 2, 8 and 9,” added Bill.

“The star button also looks much cleaner than the 7 above it,” said Nick and without thinking, started humming the rhyme that Mr. Hipobaum had been singing, *When you wish upon a star.*

Bill’s eyes brightened in the weak glow of the keypad. “That’s it! Mnemonic!” he said excitedly.

“Bill, this is no time for your stupid *nic* game!” grumbled Nick, feeling more than a little frustrated.

“No, Nick *mnemonic*. It is an easy way to remember things. Maybe Hippobottomus was singing that rhyme for a reason! A mnemonic is a rhyme where each word starts with the same letter as the word you want to remember. You know, like how to remember the names of the planets in the solar system ...”

“My very energetic monkey jumps swiftly under nine planets,” recited Nick.
“Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto.”

“OK, now think of the words to *When you wish upon a star* and look at the keypad.”

Nick did as Bill asked when suddenly it dawned on him. “I’ve got it!” he almost shouted. “There are letters underneath the numbers! OK, so the first letters of *When you wish upon a star* are W, Y, W, U, A, S which on the keypad is 999 827—six numbers!”

“Yes but 7 hasn’t been pressed,” Bill reminded him.

“All right then, 99982 and then the star key,” said Nick.

“Go on then, try them,” urged Bill.

Very carefully, Nick pressed the numbers in sequence.

9 – 9 – 9 – 8 – 2 – *

Beep, beep, beep.

“Are you sure you pressed them right?” asked Bill.

“Of course I’m sure! Watch I’ll do it again. Nine, nine, nine, eight, two, star,” said Nick, punching in each number as he said them.

Once again, the machine responded with an annoying ‘*Beep, beep, beep!*’

“Hang on a sec,” said Nick “The word ‘you’ can also be written as the letter ‘U’ and ‘U’ is on the number 8 button. That would make the sequence 9 8 982 then *.” He carefully pressed each button, whispering the numbers as he went along. The box let out a single long *beeeeeeeep* and then there was a loud ‘click’. Suddenly the whole wall tilted forward like a garage door and then stopped. The boys stepped back, their sense of dread at what lay behind the door momentarily over-shadowing their triumph at cracking the code.

There was a soft light beyond the opening, which seeped onto the garage floor like a spill of watery yellow paint. Nick bent to lift the door from the ground. His heart was beating so loudly in his chest that he was surprised the sound didn’t rattle the nearby windows. He pulled the door open a little further. Taking a deep breath and looking once more to Bill for encouragement, he ducked under the opening. When he stood up on the other side, he could not believe his eyes.

Chapter 4

An enormous machine stood before them, glinting in the fluorescent light like a sports car in a showroom. It was the same size and shape as the school bus that stood in the next stall but it was a sleek, modern version. The front however, resembled a passenger jet with its rounded nose and small windows set high. A door near the front was open and, as the boys approached, they could see stairs leading inside. They were upholstered in a plush, light-orange carpet. Underneath the fantastic bus, the tyres were rather small, and were almost lost beneath the mammoth machine.

“Wow!” was all Nick could think to say.

“It’s about time they upgraded that old rattle-trap,” said Bill, referring to the existing school bus. “This baby looks super-sonic!”

Nick climbed the steps and looked in astonishment at the space-age instrument panel that sprawled across the front. Knobs, levers, buttons and dials of all descriptions dotted the console. Where the steering wheel ought to be was a control stick that looked just like the one in the 747 aeroplane they had seen during a visit to the British Transport museum earlier that year.

“Looks like some kind of jet, or maybe a space bus,” offered Bill, following closely.

Inspecting the controls, Nick noticed that there were several computer screens. All were blank except for the one closest to the pilot’s chair. Four words were printed across the screen, followed by a flashing cursor.

Ignition sequence. Enter password:

Bill sat down and held the control stick. “This is *so* cool!” he said, pretending to fly the massive craft. He did not notice that there was a tweed jacket slung over the back of the seat.

“Hey Bill, isn’t this Hippo’s jacket?” asked Nick.

“I was wondering what that smell was,” said Bill, pulling a face. “Hey, what’s this?”

A piece of paper was sticking out of the top pocket. Bill pulled it out and read it aloud. “Aston Martin, Ferrari, Rolls Royce. I didn’t know he was into those,” he said, trying to picture his Geography teacher in a classic sports car.

“What else does it say?” asked Nick.

“Well there are £ signs all over the place, then it reads: ‘Fishing boat, Rolex, and then this weird bit: $X=Au=£££$ ’s. And right at the bottom, it says ‘H. Griffin & Sons’. I wonder what that means.”

“Looks like a shopping list,” said Nick.

“No way he gets paid that much!” exclaimed Bill. “If he does then my Mom is going to ask for a refund on my school fees!”

“Let me see,” said Nick. Bill handed him the piece of paper. Nick studied it very carefully then added, “There’s a date next to H. Griffin & Sons, look.” Nick passed the paper back to Bill, pointing in the bottom corner. “Friday, 13 October—5pm.”

“Hey, that’s tomorrow!” said Bill quickly. He put the slip of paper into his pocket. “I’ve got a feeling we’re going to need this.”

“We had better get going,” said Nick. “If we get caught here, we’re history.”

“But what are we going to do about all this?” asked Bill, starting to get worried.

“First we find out who H. Griffin & Sons are. We’ll look it up on the Internet when we get back to your place. Then we decide, OK?”

“Uh, OK, sure,” muttered Bill, not sounding sure at all.

By the time they got home, Bill had calmed down considerably. They turned Bill’s computer on and logged onto the Internet. Nick typed ‘H. Griffin & Sons’ into a search engine and clicked on the first link that came up. When the page loaded, his jaw dropped and almost hit the floor. Bill put his hand over his mouth to stifle a gasp. The boys looked at each other, too shocked to say anything.

-∞-

They decided that they had no choice but to tell the Headmaster. They went to see him first thing the following morning to report the previous night’s events. The only time Mr. Winiger showed any real surprise was when Nick said that they had solid proof that Mr. Hipobaum was planning to destroy the school. You see, H. Griffin & Sons were a demolition company based in the nearby village of Ash Green. They specialised in flattening large buildings like schools and hospitals. Nick and Bill read all about it on the website.

“See for yourself, Sir,” pleaded Nick, handing Mr. Winiger the slip of paper they had found in Mr. Hipobaum’s jacket pocket.

“I am sure there is a reasonable explanation for this boys,” said Mr. Winiger. “And this is your last warning to respect the boundaries of this school. You do realise that I could expel you for trespassing, don’t you?”

Nick and Bill looked down and nodded. Bill was terrified of being expelled and Nick just didn’t want the Headmaster to see the frustration on his face. He was furious that they should get into trouble for uncovering a plot to destroy their school and he

was determined to expose Mr. Hipobaum. When neither of the boys said anything, Mr. Winiger continued.

“I asked your Geography teacher to check on the new school bus because he happens to know an awful lot about engines. That is why he was in the shed. I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense about the school in danger of being destroyed. Now run along before I change my mind and write letters to your parents.” Although he tried his best to sound stern, there was a slight tremble in Mr. Winiger’s voice that did not escape Nick.

“This stinks!” grumbled Bill as soon as they were out of earshot.

“You’ve got that right, Bill,” said Nick. “He’s worried about something.”

“What are we going to do then? I *really* don’t want to be expelled!”

“We are not letting this one go,” promised Nick “If old Hippo wants to blow up the school, I am not going to let him get away with it.”

“We’re pushing our luck with Mr. Winiger though,” warned Bill. “We’ll have to be extra careful.”

“I know we do, mate. But we are running out of time. We *have* to go back to that shed.”

“Oh boy, I was afraid you’d say that,” said Bill. “Lunchtime?”

“Yes,” affirmed Nick. “Lunchtime. They would probably notice if we weren’t in our lessons. In the meantime, I want to find out what he meant by that strange formula $X=Au=fff's$.”

Bill thought about it for a moment. “Well, X could be just about anything. Probably has something to do with, what did you say yesterday, Planet X?”

“That’s it!” said Nick. “It must be Planet X, whatever that is. £££’s obviously means lots and lots of money but what is Au?”

That really had them puzzled. The morning seemed to drag on forever and the two novice detectives could hardly concentrate on their work. Eventually, the lunch bell went and Nick and Bill met up on the playground. On the way there, they had seen Mr. Winiger enter Mr. Hipobaum’s office looking rather agitated. At least the coast was clear for them to get to the shed unseen. When they got there, they quickly climbed through the open window and walked over to the metal box on the wall. Bill entered the code once again, 9 – 8 – 9 – 8 – 2 – * and the door opened as before. They slipped under the gap and quickly shut it again.

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Bill suddenly, “My sandwiches, I’ve left them on top of the metal box!”

He reached for the lever that opened the door from the inside and just as he was about to pull it, Nick grabbed his arm.”

“Wait!” hissed Nick.

“Wha ...” Bill tried to speak but Nick clamped his hand over Bill’s mouth.

“Shhhh!” said Nick, a little quieter. “Listen.”

They could hear voices approaching. It sounded like an argument. A cold chill ran down Nick’s back as he realised who the voices belonged to. It was Mr. Hipobaum and the Headmaster, and neither of them sounded happy. Bill’s eyes widened in fright while Nick, still not letting go of Bill, looked around frantically for a place to hide. Besides the bus, there was not much else in the shed so their options for hiding places were limited. Nick ran to a cabinet in the corner. It was quite small but there was a

chance they could fit inside. They could hear the voices very clearly now, coming from right outside the door.

“... and if you think you are going to keep all of that money for yourself then you are sorely mistaken!”

“No, no, Headmaster, that piece of paper is not mine, I promise! They are making it all up!”

“I am not a fool, Henry. How would a couple of nine-year-olds know that Au is the chemical symbol for gold? They only learn that kind of thing much later.”

Nick tried the first door of the cabinet. It was locked. The second was locked too but the third and final door opened. He looked inside but the cabinet was packed with tools and various gadgets that he did not recognise. They heard the code being typed into the keypad. They only had seconds before the door opened. They would be discovered and then expelled for sure. Frantic with worry, Nick looked around for another hiding place and suddenly realised that he couldn't see Bill anywhere.

“Bill!” he whispered as loudly as he dared. There was a loud *click* and the door opened, but there was still no sign of Bill. Just then, he heard a low whooshing sound and saw that a side panel on the bus was sliding open. Bill came running down the stairs and dived into the compartment that had opened up, yanking Nick in after him. As they tumbled in, Nick could just see two pairs of hands pulling open the main shed door and Bill noticed that there were two oversized suitcases sharing the narrow space with them. Both had tags that read ‘H.H.’ As the shed door tilted open, Bill pulled the hatch door shut. Then everything went black.

Chapter 5

With pulses racing, both Nick and Bill struggled to keep still. The space they had climbed into was cramped and they were almost on top of each other. The darkness was so complete that they couldn't see a thing. There was a strong new-carpet smell mixed with a faintly musty odour that seemed to come from the suitcases behind them. "Where are we?" whispered Nick.

"Luggage compartment," answered Bill. "There was a switch on the dashboard."

They could hear the shed door open and footsteps approaching. Although they had to strain hard to hear, they could just make out what their teachers were saying.

"... I'm telling you those brats are making it up!" insisted Mr. Hipobaum.

"Well, that's quite a story, even for those two," said Mr. Winiger. "Why would they make it up?"

"Who knows with the kids these days," said Mr. Hipobaum, trying to sound calm.

"So what is all this then?" asked Mr. Winiger, waving the piece of paper the boys had found in Mr. Hipobaum's face.

"I really have no idea, Wally," insisted Mr. Hipobaum. "It's nothing, really." He took the paper from the Headmaster and quickly stuffed it into his pocket. "Do you realise what this discovery will mean for the school?" he asked, eager to change the subject. "There will be journalists and scientists from all over the world here at the St. Thomas School. We'll be famous!"

A vague dreamy look drifted across the Headmaster's face as he thought of the certain fame their discovery would bring. "To think that two lowly teachers actually found the 10th planet, Nibiru! I can't wait to see the look on the faces of the NASA

scientists!” said Mr. Winiger gleefully. He had totally forgotten about his earlier suspicions but then he looked at Mr. Hipobaum suddenly. “Nobody else knows about this do they?”

“Of course not,” said Mr. Hipobaum, trying to be as reassuring as possible.

“I don’t want to look like an idiot if it is just a deep space comet that they already know about!”

“Relax, Wally. That is why we built this baby, remember?” he said, patting the side of the gleaming bus. “In two weeks it is half-term and you and I will go and see Nibiru for ourselves. When we get back with proof ...”

“It’ll be the Nobel prize!” finished Mr. Winiger.

Mr. Hipobaum gently steered the beaming, starry-eyed Headmaster to the door of the shed. “Don’t you worry, my old friend. I’ve got it all under control. Just have to fine-tune the thrusters and we’re ready for take-off!”

Mr. Winiger walked off into the afternoon dreaming of shaking hands with the Prime Minister and having dinner at Buckingham Palace. Mr. Hipobaum meanwhile, shut the shed door and faced the beautiful bus, rubbing his hands together like Wile E. Coyote. “Recognition from NASA? Hah!” he snorted. “And let those filthy scavengers get their hands on my gold? NEVER!”

Inside the luggage hold, the boys could not believe what they were hearing. Suddenly the bus began to rock gently and they realised that Mr. Hipobaum was climbing the stairs. Bill’s leg started to cramp so he clenched his teeth, hoping it would pass. Nick, however, remained perfectly still. He could hear a very faint humming and thought he felt the bus tilting very, very slowly. Bill was too busy trying to control the pain in his leg to notice but eventually, Nick was sure.

“Bill, we’re moving!” he said.

“Arghh, my leg!” said Bill, through gritted teeth. “Got. To. Stretch!”

“Did you hear me?” whispered Nick loudly into the darkness where he guessed Bill’s ear might be. “This bus is MOVING!”

As he said that, a spasm ripped through Bill’s leg and he kicked out, his heel, stamping hard on Nick’s foot. Nick jerked his head to the left in pain and screamed as the side of his head hit something hard on the otherwise carpeted wall behind him. He would have surely been heard had Mr. Hipobaum not started the engine. The faint hum grew into an awfully loud grumbling noise. The bus was also tilting more noticeably now and with both boys in pain, it took them a few seconds to realise that they were no longer in darkness. Nick struggled to turn around and saw what he had hit his head against. It was a switch for the interior light.

“Hey Nick, you’re a genius!” shouted Bill over the noise that now seemed to come from everywhere. He needn’t have bothered because Nick couldn’t hear a thing. From inside the luggage compartment, the noise was a deafening roar. The bus continued to tilt upwards. Bill was right on top of Nick, squashing him into the suitcases beneath him. Struggling under the weight of his friend and ignoring the pain in his foot, Nick struggled to block his ears. He managed to wriggle slightly to his right to allow Bill some room. As Bill slid down next to him, he noticed a small lever just above his head. He tried to lift his arm to reach it but the whole bus started to shake violently and he had a strange sensation of sinking. He realised that their worst fears had come true. The bus was taking off and they had no time to escape.

“What does this thing run on, *Supersonic Tonic*?” shouted Bill, right into Nick’s left ear. Nick could see Bill’s lips moving but still could not hear a thing. Bill tried again

to reach for the lever again but his arm seemed to be glued to his side. The bus crashed through the roof of the shed and the G-force of the take-off squashed the boys into a little heap at the bottom of the luggage compartment. After what seemed like an eternity, the force eventually subsided and they found that, instead of being glued to the floor, they were actually floating around the tiny space.

“We must be in orbit now,” said Nick with a mixture of wonder and dread.

“This would be cool if we had a bit more space,” moaned Bill. He elbowed one of the suitcases out of his way and once again saw the lever that he could not reach before. “What do you think that is for?” he asked.

“My guess is that it opens the hatch into the main part of the bus,” said Nick but as Bill reached for it, shouted, “Wait!”

“I don’t want to stay in here for the whole trip,” said Bill. “So what if Hippobottomus sees us? What’s he going to do, kick us out?”

“I guess not,” said Nick. “But let’s be careful OK?”

“OK,” said Bill, pulling the lever. “Here we go!”

Chapter 6

The hatch slid open silently and the boys, followed by the suitcases, floated out into the main part of the bus like a bunch of strange helium balloons. Nick swam over to the back window and could see the earth getting smaller and smaller. “This is incredible!” he said.

“Scenic!” said Bill simply.

They turned around and pulled themselves along a railing towards the front, where they could see Mr. Hipobaum strapped into the pilot’s chair. He was concentrating so hard on what he was doing that he didn’t notice the activity behind him. Suddenly he reached for a switch on the panel in front of him labelled ‘gravity simulation’. As soon as he pressed it, Nick, Bill and the suitcases came crashing to the ground. Mr. Hipobaum spun around in surprise. “What on earth ...?” he said angrily. He tried to get up but forgot that he was still strapped into his seat and flopped down again. This only enraged him further. He unbuckled himself and charged down the aisle at the boys who were trying to sit up, still dazed from the fall. “What are you two doing here?” he thundered down at them. “And how in heaven’s name did you sneak onto my bus?”

“Mnemonic!” said Bill proudly.

“You think you are so smart, don’t you?” snarled the now livid Mr. Hipobaum. He opened one of his suitcases and pulled out a length of rope. He shoved Nick onto the nearest seat and glared at him, daring him to move. Nick took a huge gulp of air, inflating his chest as much as he could and held it while Mr. Hipobaum wrapped the rope around him tightly. “There!” he grunted. “Let’s see you get out of this one!”

“Where are we going, Sir?” asked Bill, hoping to distract him but failing miserably.

“You’ll see soon enough,” said Mr. Hipobaum, turning around. He grabbed Bill by the collar and pushed him onto the seat next to Nick. “I really think you’ll like it!” An evil grin touched his thin, waxy lips as he tied Bill up as well. “In fact, I think I’ll just leave you there when I go back to earth with my treasure. The world will be a much better place without a couple of meddling monkeys like you two!”

A loud beeping noise summoned Mr. Hipobaum back to the pilot’s chair and, satisfied that the stowaways were secure, he once again strapped himself in.

“*Approaching destination,*” said a tinny female voice. “*Landing sequence initiated.*” Nick looked at his friend and could see the terror in his eyes. He was about to say something comforting when the robot voice squawked again “*Activating atmospheric shield, destination reached in T minus twenty minutes!*” Nick let out the breath he had been holding and felt the ropes loosen. He winked at Bill and showed him how easy it would be for him to wriggle out of the bond. Just then, Mr Hipobaum turned his head and Nick inhaled again quickly. The teacher cast a suspicious glance at his new travelling companions and turned his attention back to the business of landing the space bus.

“*Destination reached in T minus fifteen minutes,*” said the voice. The bus began to shake violently as they began their descent. Nick noticed Bill staring out of the window, his eyes were as wide as frisbees and his mouth was hanging open.

“What is it?” asked Nick, but at that very moment the space bus tilted and out of the small window next to him, he saw for himself. The planet they were approaching looked like a giant soap bubble. Masses of brilliant kaleidoscopic colour swirling and inter-mingling over the surface, creating new hues and shades neither of them had

ever imagined. Towards the centre, the filmy surface of the bubble was drawn down to the middle of the planet, creating an effect that looked like a massive hurricane spout. Nick could only gape in wonder as the space bus approached.

When the tip of the bus touched the surface of the bubble, it lurched forward in a sudden burst of speed, as if the planet itself was sucking them in. Neither of the boys were prepared for it. Nick felt as if his feet and stomach were trading places and Bill actually threw up all over one of the suitcases in the aisle. Mr. Hipobaum was shrieking in delight as he expertly guided the craft through the multi-coloured sky at a tremendous speed.

“T minus ten minutes,” said the robot voice. Mr. Hipobaum responded by frantically pushing knobs and pulling levers and typing away at the keyboard near his armrest. Nick clenched his fists in terror as the bus started shaking once again and thundered down towards the surface of the planet.

The last thing he can remember thinking was that, except for the brilliant sky, the planet looked very much like Earth.

Chapter 7

Once the craft had landed, Mr. Hipobaum turned towards the boys. Nick was frozen in place, staring at his teacher in absolute shock. Bill meanwhile was trying to clean up the mess he had made of himself, not giving a second thought to the suitcase he had ruined. Both the boys were trembling from the ordeal of landing on an alien planet.

“Ha!” snorted Mr. Hipobaum, “Bet you didn’t know I could fly, did you?” He got up from the pilot’s chair and walked over to them.

“Wh- wh- where are we, sir?” stuttered Bill.

“Your new home boys,” he told them. “This is Nibiru, the legendary Planet X. Scientists have been searching for this place for centuries.”

“What do you mean our new home?” asked Nick with dread.

“I think that the Earth would be far safer for me without the two of you!” huffed Mr. Hipobaum. “But don’t worry. As you will see, Nibiru does support life.”

“But *Sir!*” moaned Bill. “What is this place?”

“Planet X,” replied Mr. Hipobaum simply, as if expecting the boys to know exactly what he was talking about. They just stared in astonishment, not sure what to make of it. With a sigh, he tried to give them a brief explanation. “Planet X, also known as Nibiru, orbits the sun every 3,600 years. The last time it was here, it smashed into the Earth, taking a large chunk with it. That chunk carried the seeds of all the life you will see in a moment. In the beginning, there was enough vegetation to create a very thin atmosphere that allowed more plants to grow. What you will see is the result of thousands of years of evolution, and that explains why everything here is so similar to

Earth. You can't see it from here, but do you remember the bubble that surrounded the atmosphere as we entered? That is a barrier that the Niburites constructed to make this place invisible. Unfortunately for them, they made a slight miscalculation on the effects of the Earth's gravity, which made the shield flicker when it got too close. It only lasted for a fraction of a second but I happened to be looking in the right place at the right time. Now if you don't mind ..."

Nick just wanted to keep Mr. Hipobaum talking so that he could come up with a plan to escape. "Where is the gold that you came here for," he asked. Mr. Hipobaum looked like he was just about to answer when he suddenly stopped himself.

"Aha! That would be telling!" he sniffed. He opened one of his suitcases and pulled out a huge machete. Nick's blood turned into ice water. Mr. Hipobaum spun around and glared at his captives. He walked slowly towards them. Nick closed his eyes, expecting the worst but Mr. Hipobaum just walked past them. "I'll decide what to do with you when I get back, toodle-doo!" he said, stepping out into the sunshine and locking the door behind him. He plodded away with the machete over his shoulder, leaving the boys tied up and disappeared into the thick forest that lay just beyond the clearing they had landed in.

"Come on Buddy, we have to figure out how to get out of here," said Nick.

"OK Sherlock, how?" asked Bill. "He's locked the bus, you saw him."

"We managed to get ourselves in, getting out should be easy. Come on!" said Nick, letting out his breath again and wriggling out of the ropes. "Saw that in a movie once." Nick quickly untied Bill and they headed to the front of the bus.

"What's this knob do?" said Bill, reaching for a lever.

"Easy Tiger!" warned Nick, grabbing his hand. "For all you know that could be a self-destruct button or something."

"Nope," said Bill with a grin. "It says right here 'Main door release'." He pulled the knob and sure enough, the door opened once again. They ran out of the bus and into the clearing.

"Now what?" asked Bill.

"We go after him, of course," replied Nick. "He's up to no good, I'm sure of it."

Mr. Hipobaum was easy enough to track. He had hacked his way through the thick vegetation and the boys could walk side by side along the rough path. The jungle was rich with colour and with each step they took, could smell the strong odour of mulch and fertile ground. Nick stopped suddenly and held his arm out in front of Bill.

"What's up Nick?" he asked.

"Something isn't right."

"What do you mean, this is a jungle. It looks like a jungle and it sure smells like a jungle."

"Yes, but listen," said Nick.

"What? I don't hear anything," said Bill.

"Exactly, neither do I."

"What is your point?" asked Bill, at a complete loss as to what Nick was going on about.

"There should be crickets chirping and birds singing, but there is nothing, not a sound."

Bill realised that Nick was right. The jungle was eerily quiet. "Don't forget, we are on another planet," he said, trying to reassure himself.

"I know but I still don't like it. I get the feeling that we are being watched," said Nick looking around him warily.

"Well we can't just stand around here," said Bill. "Let's go." He pulled Nick by the arm and the boys continued on the path.

They were not sure whether they heard it first or felt it, but after a few minutes, both of them sensed a humming vibration that seemed to come from up ahead.

"What is that noise?" asked Bill.

"Sounds like a pylon," said Nick.

"A what?"

"A pylon, you know, those huge metal structures that carry power lines. They make that buzzing sound when you go near them."

"Oh yeah," said Bill. "It's sounds just like that."

Then the noise started to change from a buzzing to a crackling and then from a crackling to a low whine that changed pitch and was interrupted by bursts of static. It sounded like someone tuning an old radio.

"Cool, polyphonic!" said Bill.

As they walked, the noise grew louder. Part of Nick wanted to turn back but his curiosity and his determination to stop Mr. Hipobaum urged him on. Soon the noise was so loud that it actually made their teeth buzz. It was no wonder there were no animals in that part of the woods, thought Nick. Soon they arrived at the edge of

another clearing. Nick stopped dead in his tracks and Bill, who was studying the lush alien forest canopy as he walked, bumped right into him.

“Oi, why did you stop?” asked Bill rubbing his chin. Nick stood motionless, just staring into the middle distance. When he turned to follow Nick’s gaze, he found the answer to his question.

There before them in the clearing, stood a massive, four hundred foot tower made out of solid gold. It gleamed in the sunlight and even seemed to be radiating a light of its own. The base of the tower was about as wide as a small house and it tapered up to a point that looked as sharp as a needle. Balanced impossibly at the very top was a curious crystal ball that seemed to be rotating slowly. As the boys looked more closely, they realised that the tower was not solid, but made from tiny golden bricks. Movement near the base of the tower caught their eyes and as they looked, they saw small furry creatures jumping towards Mr. Hipobaum. Well, not exactly jumping. They were moving with a curious combination of bouncing and flying. With each bounce they flapped their very large ears, which allowed them to cover short distances at an alarming speed. Each one wore what looked like ski goggles and the ones closest to the tower carried long sharp spears. They swarmed around Mr. Hipobaum and pointed their weapons at him, shouting in high-pitched voices. They looked like cute teddy bears pretending to be fierce. Nick and Bill crouched out of sight in the undergrowth at the edge of the clearing.

Mr. Hipobaum suddenly stopped and took his greedy little eyes off the tower. He looked down at the creatures, put his hands on his hips and started tapping his foot impatiently. The little aliens were only as tall as his knee and clearly did not threaten him. Suddenly, from within the throng of these strange beings, came one that was dressed in bright red armour. The tip of his spear not only had a wickedly sharp point,

but also a brightly coloured tassel that seemed to shimmer in response to the vibrating tower. The creature addressed Mr. Hipobaum in a loud voice. The language that he spoke was full of grunts, clicks and sounds that he made by rolling his tongue. His ears were flat against his head and he was extremely agitated. Mr. Hipobaum tried to step aside but the alien guard sprang into action. He leaped into the air with his spear and flapped his ears wildly. With great agility, he turned in mid-air, and came crashing downwards, stabbing Mr. Hipobaum right in the foot. The rest of the creatures gasped and then became still. Mr. Hipobaum meanwhile was hopping about in pain swearing. He kicked at the guard with his uninjured foot and sent the poor thing flying through the air towards the boys. With a satisfied grunt, Mr. Hipobaum turned around and hobbled back towards the golden tower.

Nick and Bill looked on in amazement from their hiding place. The poor creature had landed a few feet in front of them, unconscious. His goggles had fallen off his head and lay in the grass a short distance away. The rest of them, instead of attacking Mr. Hipobaum as you might have expected, jumped backwards and allowed him to pass. Then an even more peculiar thing happened. The alien creatures started giggling like a group of school-girls.

“What *are* they laughing about?” asked Bill in a whisper, but as he looked to his left, he discovered that his best friend was gone. Bill looked around in a panic but then saw Nick leopard-crawling towards the unconscious guard. Bill was too scared to shout because he did not want to draw any attention to himself so he bit his bottom lip instead and let out a soft whimper. Nick grabbed the goggles and wriggled back like a lightning snake to their hiding place. Luckily he had not been seen. The furry creatures were too busy laughing and pointing at the man hobbling towards the tower.

“Why aren’t they trying to stop him?” whined Bill. “And what on *earth* is so funny?”

“Don’t forget, we are not on earth any more,” said Nick dryly, putting on the goggles. “Oh my goodness gracious me! You have *got* to see this!”

Bill took the goggles from Nick and put them on himself. Through specially modified lenses, he could now see the same multi-coloured bubble that they had seen from the space bus, radiating outwards from the crystal ball on the top of the tower. In a glorious beam, it shot skywards and then opened up in a swirling mass that covered the entire planet. “So this is how they made the shield!” exclaimed Bill.

“Yes,” said Nick. “And if Mr. Hipobaum takes any of that gold, he will destroy the tower *and* the shield.”

“So why aren’t they trying to stop him?” asked Bill again.

“Maybe they already have,” said Nick, turning his attention to the commotion at the tower once more.

As Mr. Hipobaum limped closer to the tower, the guards started nudging each other, pointing and giggling with excitement. Then, just as he reached out to the tower, they all stopped what they were doing and just stared. As his finger touched the first gold brick, there was a blinding flash of light and a very loud bang. When the boys looked again, their Geography teacher had turned into a solid gold statue. The creatures fell about laughing and dropped their spears on the floor. Some of them took off their goggles to wipe away their tears of delight. One of them tried to copy what Mr. Hipobaum had done. He bounced a short distance, reached out his hand and shouted ‘*Bang*’. Then, with a completely blank expression, toppled over like a giddy garden

gnome. The rest of them thought this was very funny indeed and rolled about in fits of laughter.

“How did they do that?” asked Bill, trying very hard not to laugh himself.

“My guess is that it had something to do with his spear,” said Nick pointing to the guard who had stabbed Mr. Hipobaum in the foot. “It was probably poisoned or something.”

The unconscious guard that lay in front of them started to stir. In a riot of noise, the mob of laughing creatures came hopping and flapping to cheer as he got up. The guard looked around for his goggles and suddenly stopped and turned. He peered into the undergrowth where the boys were hiding and instantly spotted Bill who was still wearing them.

Chapter 8

Two more armour-clad guards made their way to the edge of the clearing and pointed their spears at Nick and Bill. They gestured for them to stand with their hands up which they did without argument. One of them babbled orders to the group and about twenty of them rushed off to get the golden statue that used to be a Geography teacher. With tremendous effort, they finally managed to pick him up and put him on the floor next to the two frightened boys. A look of stupid surprise was frozen on his face and when one of the creatures mimicked the expression, the rest of them began laughing all over again. The boys, however, did not find it funny at all. The guards motioned for them to turn around and marched them back the way they had come. Behind them, Nick and Bill could hear the others as they picked the statue up and followed them into the forest.

When they finally reached the space bus, Nick and Bill were ordered inside. With amazing coordination, the Furry Flappers, as Nick had come to think of them, shoved the statue in after them. Nick looked around him and then realised with a sudden rush of panic that, with Mr. Hipobaum turned into gold, there was no way for them to get back to Earth. Just then, there was a loud tapping sound. An old Nibirian creature was knocking his long, gnarled cane against the side of the open door. He had a long shabby beard that was the colour of dark chocolate, streaked with silver. By the string of bones around his neck, Nick guessed that it was the medicine man or the shaman of the clan. Nick could somehow sense that all it wanted was for them to leave in peace. He couldn't explain how he sensed that, he just knew they were no longer in any danger. The creature held his gaze and, all of a sudden, Nick felt a strange sense of calm, as if he had been magically hypnotized. The shaman gave Nick a large rusty

disc that had small glass beads embedded around the edge and a shiny chrome button in the middle. The creature smelled awful, rather like an old mangy dog. Nick held his nose as it explained to him using gestures what to do with the disc. Nick couldn't help but notice a sly grin behind the old thing's beard but had no choice but to trust him. He assumed that by following the shaman's instructions, he could somehow bring Mr. Hipobaum back to life. With one final grunt, the old shaman slammed the door behind Nick and pointed his cane to the sky. The rest of the group copied what the shaman had done by shaking their fists and pointing to the sky, chanting for them to leave.

"What was that all about?" asked Bill, beside himself with worry. "We have to get out of here fast, but how are we going to fly this thing? And what are we going to do about him?"

"Everything will be OK," said Nick and walked slowly over to Mr. Hipobaum with the disc in his hand.

"Wait!" urged Bill. "What is that?"

"The shaman gave it to me. I think that this contains the antidote for the potion that turned him into gold. He knelt down and placed it on Mr. Hipobaum's forehead.

Nick very carefully pressed the chrome button and dragged Bill to a safe corner of the space bus, behind the pilot's chair. The glass beads flickered as an amber light flashed through them in a circle going faster and faster, emitting a series of deafening beeps. The boys hid behind the chair, covering their ears. Through the glass they could see the Nibirians bouncing around outside, holding their flapping ears, trying to copy them and laughing uncontrollably once more. They seemed to think that everything was terribly funny.

Then everything went deathly quiet, and just as Bill opened one eye and peeked around the chair, there was another very loud bang and a puff of blue smoke filled the inside of the bus. Bill screamed in horror because he thought he had just witnessed his best friend blow the head off their Geography teacher. The events of the day proved far too much for him and he collapsed in a faint. Nick ran over to see what had become of Mr. Hipobaum. The man still had a sore foot but was otherwise unhurt and fully back to himself again. Mr. Hipobaum shot up and without a word, ran to the pilot's chair, frantically trying to get the space bus started.

Nick was relieved that they were finally going home. Bill was starting to come to, so Nick helped him up into the co-pilot's chair. Bill gave Mr. Hipobaum a groggy look and then turned to face Nick.

"Panic mechanic," he said with a smile and promptly passed out again.

Meanwhile, Mr. Hipobaum got the space bus started. Before long, they blasted off from the surface of Planet X, leaving a crowd of very happy Niburites behind them.

Chapter 9

The journey back to earth was thankfully without drama except for the peculiar way Mr. Hipobaum was behaving. Nick waved his hands in front of the teacher's face but he acted as if Nick was not there at all. Bill even tried shouting in his ear but it had absolutely no effect.

When they finally landed, they found Mr. Winiger waiting anxiously for them. He was quite upset. He started shouting but then took one look at Mr. Hipobaum and rushed him to sick bay where he collapsed on a bed and fell into a deep sleep. Later in the Headmaster's office, the boys recounted everything that had happened.

"You boys were very brave indeed!" said Mr. Winiger. "I would like to give you awards for bravery but I think it would be better if we kept this to ourselves. You were right to want to protect the creatures of Nibiru. I am afraid that if anyone else discovers the existence of that golden tower, they might too be blinded by greed and put the creatures as well as themselves in great danger. Mr. Hipobaum has been through a terrible ordeal today as well but I will make sure he never mentions this to anyone. He probably won't remember much anyway!"

"Thank you sir," said Nick. "I think we should be going home now, our parents are probably very worried."

"What are you talking about Mr. Taylor? You still have another three periods to attend before the end of the day. You have only been gone for about half an hour!"

"Half a what?" began Nick, very confused.

"Off you go now boys," interrupted the Headmaster with a smile. "I'll explain that to you another day."

A few weeks later, they were discussing how it could be possible for only a few minutes to pass on Earth during the time they were away when the school fire alarm sounded. In the past, that usually meant that the whole school had to gather in the playing field, as they had practiced during fire drills. Over the intercom however, they could hear a rather worried Mr. Winiger ordering everyone into the hall.

As the children filed in, Nick snuck to the back of the hall. He looked out of the window and saw the reason for the alarm as well as why they were in the hall instead of on the field. He called Bill over and pointed out of the window to hundreds of massive orange toadstools that had not been there during break an hour earlier. Nick smiled at Bill who knew without a doubt that they were in for another incredible adventure.

THE END