



# MICROBOTS 1

**BY EL DEE.**

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## IN THE BEGINNING.

“Goodness Commander, everything's got a bluish look.”

“Indeed Lieutenant, our probing robot reports most of the surface is covered with this substance which it's classified as H<sub>2</sub>O.”

“Is that not the liquid substance called water? In the distant past the Ancients said it covered much of the surface of our World too.”

“This could be so, but the robot has malfunctioned and crashed. This has never happened before. I don't want to risk the last two Microbots, so we'll close the planet and take a closer look.”

“But Sir, as we get closer the surface appears to be not all blue. I can see some of it's green except at the top and bottom of the sphere. There it's white, very white indeed. Much like those very cold planets we encountered on entering the system.”

“Yes, I can see that now as we gain an orbit.”

“There are patches of white amidst the green too.”

“Yes. We must land and explore further if we're to find answers to what substances exist on this planet. It could prove to have many of the things the Federation seeks for survival.”

“If only this proves true, Commander, we can end our search and return home.”

The two other crew members nodded in agreement. Everyone was homesick and tired too. There had been little room for comfort on the long journey.

“The heat scan suggests the only life present is of a primitive kind. No indications of structures other than natural formations either. No organised patterns of life unless they exist underground.”

“Excellent. It seems safe to descend to the surface then. Prepare the lander for the descent while I program the space vehicle to continue in orbit. At least we can stretch our legs while making a detailed investigation of what elements are in quantity and collecting samples after we find a suitable place to set down.”

## ONE.

"She's dead!"

"Oh no! It can't be true ..."

"Deidre was talking to Mouse only a moment ago."

Margot Lurline and Bella wailed together cluttering helplessly around their friend's still body which lay full length on the hard pavement.

"No she's just unconscious."

"What would you know Mouse? You're no nurse."

"I don't think anyone snores when they're dead Bella."

"You did something to her Mouse," accused Margot.

"I never touched her."

Iona hated the nickname Deidre labelled her the day she joined their class.

"Anyway, she was doing all the yelling."

"Well you gave her a stroke then," accused Bella.

"You can't just give anyone a stroke," Bren said as he steered his wheelchair closer. "She's in a coma, all right."

"Careful. You might run over her," cried Lurline.

None of Deidre's pals disputed the fair-headed Bren Larsen. Despite his disability, he was the best looking boy in the class and the smartest. They didn't know why? Perhaps it was because his legs were paralysed and he couldn't play sport, he had more time than others to study. Arguing with him always ended the same way with someone else looking foolish. However, the new girl Iona was nearly as bad. This was what caused the fuss after school when Deidre chased after her. Their friend didn't like Mr James, the rather dreamy English teacher discovering she'd not completed her assignment yet. Though they never expressed the idea aloud, they felt Deidre might've got it wrong calling the newcomer Mouse. Her looks were deceiving. She certainly never showed any timidity.

"What happened Iona?"

"She came up to me on the bus line Bren, screaming like a mad thing. Then wham! Closed her eyes and fell down."

Bren could've blamed her for what happened, because over the past three weeks Deidre and Iona frequently clashed. Instead he sent a bystander to fetch the duty teacher. He was a great organiser. Meanwhile the kids in the queue crowded around goggle-eyed, but were surprisingly quiet. Many of them had watched an angry Deidre accost Iona and expected fireworks, perhaps a fight. Her sudden collapse stunned them.

"Now you're for it," said Bella as the art teacher, Ms Wilkins pushed her way through the growing crowd.

Ms Wilkins was more concerned getting everyone to stand clear of Deidre's unconscious form for the moment.

Iona was pushed thankfully to the edge of the scene and for some unknown reason looked for the old man. Most nights these past three weeks he waited across the road by the park gates. Why? She didn't know. It was almost as if he wanted to talk to her, but speaking with strangers was not the done thing. Yes, there he was and he still wore that rather silly looking headset with the dark, blue visor over his shock of white hair. God! Now he smiled broadly and gave her the thumbs up sign. For a moment, she glimpsed something familiar in the expression on his weather-beaten features.

"Who's that?" Bren asked, then seemed to forget the question in his hurry to tell her the latest news. "Arty Wilkins has sent for an ambulance and wants to talk to you. Guess who put her up to that."

Iona felt panic. She controlled the feeling, consoling herself she'd done nothing wrong.

"Well here's my bus. She'll just have to wait. I've got to pick up heaps of things for Mum on my way home," said Iona. "Don't tell her I've gone, will you?"

Bren grinned, his grey eyes shone mischievously and he wheeled back into the milling crowd. He steered directly into the middle of the medley, adding to the confusion as some tried to scramble towards the rumbling old coach. His action created just enough confusion within the mayhem, for Iona to slip on board with the first passengers.

As she slunk down in a rear seat on the outside of the bus, Iona noticed the weird old man still standing there. He'd seen her board the bus and appeared to nod approvingly. Suddenly, he disappeared. She sat upright and stared in surprise, forgetting she might be spotted by Ms Wilkins. That was impossible. Things like that only happened on the television. However, he was no where in view as the half-filled bus pulled away, making room for the ambulance with its flashing lights. Many of the usuals missed their ride, deciding to stay back and gape at the spectacle.

None of her class caught this early trip, preferring not to be swamped by young kids who joined the school bus from the junior school down the road. Iona had not lied to Bren. It was always her job to fetch the shopping Mum ordered on her way to work on Fridays. Thursdays being pay-day meant there was some money for food. After the rent, telephone and electricity bills, there was precious little left over in reward for the long hours spent by Mrs Barclay on the assembly line at the local juice factory. Boring and exhausting work, but considering her lack of work experience, the best she could get.

The old man was forgotten and Deidre too. Iona was once more worrying about her Mother. Helen Barclay was not a well woman. The explosion in London which killed both Iona's Grandparents inflicted a serious penalty on her health. Their move to Australia three years earlier didn't improve things. Why here? Because Helen was born in Sydney where her English Father was a teacher for ten years. Iona, now nearly thirteen was still puzzled why they fled England. Where was her own Father? Years before she dimly recalled him kissing her goodbye at another airport. He never appeared to give help, even after the police explained the gas main exploded accidentally. Mum refused to believe them. There was lots she had not told her daughter. Saying it was better if Iona knew nothing, before dashing to her room to sob softly alone which she did most nights. Always alone. Never allowing the girl the chance to comfort her or share the grief. Tired, she rarely watched television or had any interest in anything apart from struggling to and from work.

It was no different this Friday when Helen arrived home, so exhausted she could barely pick at the dinner Iona had prepared. With the ironing finished, the house cleaned, Iona wanted to talk about what occurred with Deidre after school. Her Mother's reaction to the news was not favourable.

"I've told you a dozen times Iona, don't make a spectacle of yourself. Remember what happened in the other places we've tried to live in Sydney," Helen said crossly.

Helen Barclay's small frame, similar in build to her daughter's shook with anguish. She was not often as direct as Iona, preferring to behave in a restrained manner, especially when placed in a position where she had to deal with people in authority. Her confidence gone along with her good health.

"Official-like people interfering in our affairs are likely to create more problems for us," she cried nervously.

With that she hurried from the room, her brown eyes brimming with tears. Pausing at the door to say a few final words.

"This is the first reasonably paid job I've managed to find. Don't spoil it Iona. One day we'll ... we'll ... Oh! I can't handle this."

As usual, Iona had no understanding of her Mother's fears. Also, she offered no support towards the confrontation with the School Principal which might have to be faced on Monday.

The telephone trilled sharply startling Iona. Surely it couldn't be the school ringing now. Who else? She had no friends and Helen Barclay never received any personal calls, refusing to answer the phone if she could avoid it. Even then rarely speaking with anyone either. Perhaps it was bad news? Deidre was dead! Though truthfully, she could see no reason for any

real worry about that happening. She never touched the angry girl and anyway, she appeared just fast asleep. The phone trilled again.

"I'm not home to anyone, Iona," Helen called.

"Okay Mum," said Iona lifting the receiver nervously.

Never give the phone number or your name were Mum's instructions. Be polite, but short with information.

"Hello," she said quietly.

"That you Iona? Bren here."

"Oh Bren. How'd you get me. We've a silent number."

"Ve have our own secret methods of gettin' information," he replied in a phoney German accent. "I tapped into the school computer."

Of course. The school had their number in case of emergencies Iona realised. But, what had Bren done? Was he one of those hackers she'd heard about who break into other computer files?

He chuckled when questioned. "I just got lucky."

It was rather fun to have someone to talk with and Iona was truly interested in computers. She'd never owned or even used one, despite them being available at school. Deidre managed to see she was always an observer.

"You can come round one day and have a go on mine. My Uncle Col just upgraded it for my birthday to a super system. An Intel Pentium with a seventeen inch screen which is great for the Internet ... "

Iona was lost in confusion when Bren continued to explain the advantages of his new computer over his old one.

"What's the Internet exactly," she managed to interrupt.

"It's the largest collection of computers in the World. Millions and millions of them working together in networks. They call it the World-Wide Web. WWW for short."

"Why?"

"So they can get information from this database. It's like a huge library, except you don't go to it. It comes to your computer like on television via the phone lines, or cable if you're lucky enough to have it available in your area. You know with stuff about sport, travel science and anything else you want to know."

"It sounds pretty interesting."

"Hey. I could show you it tomorrow and I've heaps of games you can have a go at too. No. Hang on, we gotta go out. Sunday after lunch then?"

"What about your friends or folks. Er, won't they think ..." Iona didn't know exactly how to put it.

"Nah. Les and Campbell come round occasionally, but the rest, well they haven't much time for a cripple and there's only me and my Mum."

Something they had in common. This was the first time he sounded bad about his disability. Usually he was cheerful, never mentioning being chained to a wheelchair. But, he hadn't understood what she was trying to get across.

"Yeah, but I'm a girl."

He laughed, "Yes, I kinda noticed that Iona. Maybe that's why I'm askin' you."

Gee! Was Bren flirting with her? Iona felt goose-bumps. Her first beau. She caught a glimpse of herself in the wall mirror. Page cut, soft brown hair, dark eyes too big for a face, which someone in the past called elfin. No, not possible. She was too scrawny, the class ugly duckling. Perhaps he was feeling sorry for her. Then Bren was always friendly and had been from the first day. He was the same with everyone, even Deidre.

"That would be fun. Thanks Bren. I'd really love a go on your computer. But, Sunday's out for me. Mum and I do the grounds as she works most Saturdays."

"Oh! Does your Father work weekends?"

"No. He's, well, not around exactly."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to pry."

"No worries. What I meant was Mum and I haven't seen him for years since we left America."

"Thought you said you came from England, though I admit you do sound a bit like a Yank at times."

"It's a long story. Mum doesn't talk about it."

"Sounds a bit like my place. My Mum won't talk about my Dad's crash. Never mind, that's old news. Oh! By the way, that old Codger was asking some of the kids about you."

Hurriedly, she ended the conversation. Iona felt shivery all over. This stranger sought her whereabouts. Had he anything to do with Mum's fears?

## TWO.

Monday's school hours went very smoothly for Iona, with none of the expected confrontation with the teachers over Friday's incidence. Deidre was back, healthy and vocal as ever. She was involved at the centre of attention retelling any who ventured near, about the ambulance ride and the battery of hospital tests. Her classmate looked every bit the part of an injured starlet, Iona had to admit to herself. Of course, the fact she was unconscious throughout everything was never mentioned. The mysterious condition which brought on her coma, baffled the best medical minds Deidre assured the avid listeners. None of whom questioned her story. After all, she was the self-appointed class leader and had no real opposition until Iona arrived, who was pleased, that for once the whole day passed without being addressed as Mouse. In fact the Star of the day appeared to avoid the newest member of the class.

But, there was still the bus to catch after school.

The old man was not in sight when the same old coach pulled noisily away. Why did adults think old rattlers were good enough for kids? Perhaps the noise and exhaust fumes hid him from sight. An examination of the park entrance and nearby area showed nothing. He was not there.

Thankfully he didn't show up the next day or all week.

Bren insisted Iona come round to his place on Saturday afternoon. When Friday came with no stranger in view, she arrived home breathlessly, even a little excited. A card in the box meant hurrying back to the Post Office after dumping the groceries on the kitchen sink. She contained her excitement at what the small package held until she got home. It was addressed to her. Miss Iona Barclay, 17 Peterson Street. Perhaps it was from Bren? She could think of no one else.

A headset!

Or was it a walkman? It could've been either.

There was no note. No return address. No clue as to where it came from or who sent it. A closer examination of the inside of the box revealed nothing other than a group of letters and symbols on the flap which made no sense. It's sender was a real mystery and her birthday was another month off. She discounted the idea her Mother had anything to do with it. This was something else they could never afford.

Iona picked up the headset and thought she had seen it before or something similar. In fact, it looked like the one the old man wore. Certainly not new with many scratch marks. It was like no walkman she'd ever seen. No jack for the tiny ear pieces to fit into a player, nor a place to attach anything. Just an unusual blue sunvisor fastened to the strap. It couldn't be the stranger's could it?

When Helen came home she immediately took fright at the sight of the headset. When told about the old stranger who had appeared by the park gates after school, she swept it up, box and all and threw it into the garbage bin outside.

"Why did you do that Mum?"

"It's old and dirty. Certainly of no use or value."

"You've seen this or something like it before. Haven't you? You looked really frightened when you saw it, didn't you."

"Your Father ... "

Helen hastened from the room quickly.

"What about my Father? You never say a word about him. Just what's it I can't be told," Iona called after Helen through her own tears.

As in the past Mrs Barclay was not prepared to discuss the subject with her daughter. Iona knew she'd get nothing from her Mother and ran outside to recover the headset. This was the only thing she could believe once belonged to her Father. Well, the clue wrenched from Helen's lips suggested it so. There were no photos, nor any memento she'd ever discovered within their few possessions. This, she was going to keep, even hiding it from her parent.

In her room she slipped it on. It was too big and the blue visor fell over her forehead. Nothing came from the tiny earpieces. Not even the sound of the sea one heard in cone shells picked up at the beach. Surprisingly it was very light. No weight at all. Mum was right. The headset was old and scratched. There appeared no way to get it to work and valueless as Mum said. Except perhaps it was once worn by her Father. This fact made it precious. So she stuffed the headset into its box and slid it under her bed. Mum never looked there and anyway, Iona did most of the vacuuming.

But, had the old man sent it to her? Iona felt tense. Of course, he might know something about her Father. He could've spoken to her about him. However, she had never given him the chance. Or was there another, more sinister reason? Mum showed real terror tonight. Strangely, the girl felt only satisfaction. At last she had something to hold and to cherish. Her long lost Father's features were just a blur, but the headset surely bore the imprint of his head. Iona tried to sleep, but the thought her Dad might've sent the headset kept her awake. When she eventually slept, a dream revealing the old man was really her Father in disguise helped her to relax into a deep sleep.

Come Saturday and on the spur of the moment Iona took the headset around to show Bren. His Mother was out. After hearing how it arrived, he was intrigued, forgetting the real purpose of her visit to play computer games, while he studied the strange looking set.

"These earpieces fit right into your ears."

He arranged it on Iona's head by tightening the band. She knelt before his wheelchair where he could reach.

"Hold on. There's a tiny impression on the right one. I'll stick a pencil point into it and see ... Hey! What's up?"

Iona jerked upright, tearing the headset from her head. Her eyes widened with fright.

"It spoke to me! Spoke my name I think and other things I didn't understand. Was it the old man speaking? That's not possible. There's no sign of any batteries and it certainly doesn't look like a mobile phone. So what could've caused it to sound like one?"

"They can make things pretty small now using micro-technology. But, this would have to be the smallest receiver in the world I think. What else did it say?"

"I definitely heard the name Iona. The next part wasn't right, something like 'Linares' I think it was anyway. It had a tinny sound though, something like a scratchy old record."

"Can't you remember anything else."

Iona thought Bren was getting pushy. However, as it was his place and he was only trying to help, she told him what she could recall, something about a key.

"Linares. A person's name or a place?" Bren wondered.

"Beats me. But if it was a name, perhaps this was sent to me by mistake. It should have gone to someone called Iona Linares, they just got the wrong address."

"That's possible. The part about a key could be helpful," Bren mused. "You sure there's nothing in the packet. I wish you'd brought it."

"I'll have another look when I get home."

"Hey, can I've a go?"

Iona was getting tired of all this because she really wanted to use the computer. To please Bren she agreed. The headset was placed on Bren's head. It fitted him better. He adjusted the visor so it sat comfortable across his forehead.

"Pass me another pencil Iona, this one's point broke when you jumped."

For several minutes he tried to repeat the effect, coaxing Iona into pressing the pencil point into the impression. Nothing happened. Bren pulled the headset off and studied it again. He grunted, wheeled himself to his computer desk and the girl thought he was giving up. Instead Bren grabbed a magnifying glass and began to examine the earpieces closely, especially the impression on the right one.

"Aha! Ve have solved the puzzle I zink. Vell, maybe perhaps ve have uncovered another clue."

Iona giggled. His German act was really quite funny and appeared it was something he did when pleased.

"Look here Iona. There's an extremely small hole inside that impression."

She focussed the glass and peered where a shadow revealed the impression. Sure enough, after some raising and lowering of the magnifying glass, she saw there was indeed a tiny dip within it. Too small for most pencils.

"Maybe if we had a small needle," she suggested.

Bren wheeled away to get one from his Mother's sewing box. Because Iona was too nervous, he put the headset back on. After several attempts he gained a different result.

"I can see pictures on the inside of the sunvisor," he said excitedly. "No. Not exactly pictures more a shifting pattern of shapes."

He went quiet while Iona could hardly restrain herself from jumping up and down.

"It's like a screen-saver," said Bren eventually.

Iona looked at him blankly.

"Look at my monitor, see the patterns changing. They stop the screen getting burnt when you're not using it. Saves you turning it on and off all the time."

"Can I've a look?"

Bren twisted the sunvisor up so she could see. Despite it being upside down, the moving patterns did seem similar to the ones on the monitor screen.

"It's like a miniature screen."

"That's it Iona. It could be some sort of a headset computer. A tiny repeater perhaps. But, there's no sign of a power source. I wonder where its main processor is located?"

For some minutes they both studied the evolving patterns as if searching for some clue to their origin. Then Bren used the needle again. He succeeded only in turning off the pictures. Further attempts did nothing other than bring the screen alive with the patterns. Unfortunately they couldn't locate how to switch on the sound. An hour of fiddling and studying under the magnifying glass produced nothing new.

"All the same. This thing's weird," Bren sighed. "We can't find any batteries and it doesn't have cables. Let alone anyway you could plug it in anywhere. Sorry Iona, it's got me beat. And heck, I haven't shown you how to use my computer."

Iona glanced up at the time on the wall clock. Too late now. She must hurry home before Mum finished work.

"Never mind Bren. I really appreciate your help in trying to solve my mystery."

"I wasn't much help really and I did promise to let you use the computer. Hey, could you come next Saturday perhaps?"

"Sure, I can't see any problem. Mum'll most likely be working again. I'll check and let you know if it's all right on Monday."

Iona just managed to arrive home before her Mother and hide the headset after a search of the packet. As she told Bren, there was nothing else in the box. Apart from the original paper packing which she unfolded there was no key or anything at all. She was disappointed the set might not have belonged to her Father after all. But, why did Helen Barclay react so fearfully?

The old man might have the answer and for the first time she wished he would reappear after school next Monday. If he was not wearing a headset with a sunvisor, Iona was going to cross the road and speak to him directly. He might refuse to answer. Yet, these past weeks she felt he looked as if he wanted to talk. With everyone waiting for buses and the duty teacher around, what could happen?

### THREE.

The old man was not there on Monday, or Tuesday. But, on Wednesday he was waiting in the usual place. Iona crossed the road to speak to him. She was nervous about the far-fetched prospect he might just be her Father as she'd dreamt. A large removals van blocked her view for a moment as she stepped off the curb. When it passed, the elderly stranger had gone! Disappeared as quickly as last time she saw him. He was not wearing earphones with a sunvisor. Did it mean the headset was truly meant for her and not this Iona Linares?

He didn't return the rest of the week. Despite feeling let down at the old man's continued absence, Iona couldn't help herself puzzling over the headset. Even to the point of getting behind in school assignments. Each night when her Mother went to bed, early as usual, she fiddled with the set with all shapes and sizes of needles for hours. Nothing worked other than the occasional reappearance of the screen patterns.

Bren was disappointed too there was no key in the box. However, they didn't talk about the headset at school, only over the phone. Not risking embarrassment if someone overheard their conversation, was Iona's excuse. Or was it because she didn't want to be seen too often talking alone with a boy?

At Friday's lunch break, Iona learned the old man had asked Campbell, another classmate about her on the day Deidre was taken to the hospital.

"Well, what did he say Campbell?"

"Nothin' much. Just kept on saying your name."

"Iona Barclay."

"Nah. Just kept on saying *Iona, Iona, Iona* in this funny tinny voice. He went on and on until Les came over and said your other name was Barclay. Then he shut up and er ... well seemed to just disappear."

Campbell looked around to see if others were listening. He acted embarrassed.

"Actually, I didn't really see where he went 'cos I was lookin' at the ambulance. It were one of those new ones."

Iona kept quiet about her own experience when she too thought for a moment the old man disappeared into thin air.

"What did he look like close up?"

"Dunno. Didn't really take much notice. Just like any other old bloke. Ask Les. Hey Mouse, what's all this about?"

She ignored the use of the dreadful nickname and avoided answering his question too. Moving away, saying she'd go and find Les. However, Les knew less than Campbell and was not really interested in answering her inquiries. Instead, when Campbell joined his mate,

they both teased Iona about Bren until she laughed them off and shot into the girls' toilet in an attempt to get away from them. As usual, the tactic succeeded.

Bren patiently took Iona through using his computer on Saturday afternoon and even got her to attempt a couple of simple games. As she didn't take the headset around there was really nothing to distract them from the real purpose of her visit. However, both kept coming back to how they could get it to work every so often. By four, they'd both had enough of computer games. Once again the puzzle of the headset took their attention until Bren's Mother came in and suggested it was nearly time to go to his Uncle Col's place for a barbecue.

Iona just beat her Mother home again. She never asked where she'd been and declared herself too tired for dinner. Once again the girl was alone for the rest of the evening and finally managed to rid all thoughts of the headset from her mind. The time was used with purpose to catch up on the neglected English and History assignments. But, sleep failed to come quickly when she went to bed. The headset or rather a fantasy concerning the possibility it contained a message from her Father kept her awake long into the night.

Sunday was not a happy day in the Barclay house as both Mother and daughter were tired. They became quite snappy with each other. That night when they retired, Monday loomed ahead of another boring, hard week of work packing poppers into cartons for Helen with another frustrating one for Iona catching up on school work and avoiding thinking about the headset.

Indeed, the next couple of weeks dragged on with little change in either of their circumstances. Helen was always tired, while Iona became quite disenchanted with the headset and nearly threw it into the garbage several times. Neither did she spend Saturdays with Bren. He had fallen from his wheelchair at the Uncle's barbecue and badly injured his already fragile legs. So he was kept home from school. This deprived the girl of any real company although Les and Campbell were occasionally chatty. Fortunately she struck up a kind of a lunch break friendship with a couple of girl classmates, Tivoli and Jill.

Unfortunately, both girls were keen on sports and spent much time together after school and the weekends either playing tennis, or being coached swimming. Activities Iona herself wouldn't have minded enjoying, but had neither the time available from running the house or the money. At least, there was someone to talk with occasionally and keep out of Deidre and her special pals way during breaks. Not so in class. Strangely, it was now not the class leader who kept niggling about this and that, but her bosom pals, Margot, Lurline and Bella.

For some reason the three seemed to delight in either talking about Iona in an unkind manner, loudly to any who would listen, or criticise her efforts in class. Of course Deidre did nothing to stop them, while strangely she herself appeared to avoid speaking directly to their

victim. If anything, she acted nervous if ever finding herself alone in Iona's company without her protective friends. Could she possibly suspect Mouse caused her to fall into that coma?

The idea Deidre was wary of her amused Iona a little. Of course the possibility of it being true, she knew was silly.

Therefore none of this caused an improvement in Iona's mood, especially during the lonely hours of an evening when her Mother went exhausted to bed. She rang Bren a couple of times, but was unable to speak with him. He was confined to bed. Mrs Barclay complained the frequent use of the phone would increase her financial burden. This sparked another row when Iona tried to explain local calls from home were a set charge in Australia. Far cheaper than public boxes. Helen wouldn't believe it, threatening to have the telephone removed.

Nothing appeared to be going right for the Barclays. It was situations like this which caused them to move several times since arriving in Australia. Possibly at first they both experienced after shocks from the tragic loss of the elder Barclays. Iona shrugged the effects off while depression deepened within her Mother. Doctors prescribed depressant drugs which really only made her sick. Another job would be lost.

The dole was applied for once more and this further depressed Helen. It was only when Iona threatened to leave school, lie about her age and get work herself her Mother would rally. Although she had no skills, when dressed up, Mrs Barclay looked great and managed somehow to find another unskilled job. Sydney was a big city and the opportunities existed for those who searched hard for work. But, there was often a catch. A single woman with someone to support frequently had to accept part time wages, which were often little more than the Social Services benefit.

The juice factory proved the exception. On Monday when Helen Barclay returned home from work at the usual time she surprised Iona with some good news.

"I've been taken off the assembly line and sent to the dispatch warehouse Iona,' she smiled happily.

"Great Mum. You shouldn't get so tired."

"No. It's better than that. I'm a tally clerk and placed on the permanent staff. The old one had to give up, because her husband's been appointed to a new job in Melbourne."

"More pay?"

"Just a little bit more. But, there's the chance of a bonus each month, which part time workers didn't share in."

"What about the hours?"

"Eight to five and no Saturday work either."

Things were indeed looking better for the Barclays.

## FOUR.

"Bren, what does www.ferrari.it, mean?"

Iona was peering over his shoulder at the screen. He was up out of bed with his legs better, ready for school after the weekend. When she arrived he was engaged in his favourite occupation, surfing the Internet.

"Oh. That's the site I was going to visit next when you came in," he said.

"No. That's not what I mean. What are all the letters and stops and things?"

He looked a bit peeved for a moment.

"I just told you." Then he understood what she meant. "Huh. Do you mean the code."

She nodded eagerly.

"That's how they name different sites on the Internet so when you put them on your screen, you're connected."

Iona took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

"Weeeeell. I think there's something like that written on the inside of the box the headset came in."

"Great. Oh! I don't suppose you've brought it."

"Nope. But, I've got my bike and it will only take me ten minutes to get home and bring if you like."

"You'd be a lifesaver if you would. I've been bored out of my tiny brain these past weeks. Solving your puzzle would make my day."

It took a little longer than ten minutes. Although it was strange having her Mother home on Saturday afternoons, luckily she was sound asleep. Therefore, Iona was able to grab the headset and box without being caught with the forbidden thing.

Within a minute of her return they were reading those once illegible symbols with Bren's magnifying glass.

"It's not exactly like the site codes I've been used to," Bren muttered as he wrote it down to Iona's dictation. "We'll just check it again, aye, tee, colon, double you, double you, double you, slash, slash, dot, ell, ell. That right?"

"Yes. Perhaps it's silly now that I look at it again."

After the first bout of excitement they both felt a bit disappointed. However, Bren was determined to give it a try. He quickly typed in, it:www//.ll which appeared across the screen.

Nothing happened.

Bren tried again, this time attempting to force his browser to accept the message. The code froze on the screen. It was a flop. He moved to delete it again.

**<ARE YOU AUTHORISED?>**

Iona and Bren gulped. Stared at each other in amazement. They gazed back at the words on the screen for a moment, then burst into excited laughter.

"We did it," they shouted together.

Then soberly Bren nodded to Iona.

"Are we authorised?"

"I guess we must be. We've got the headset."

She picked it up as Bren typed the word 'yes'.

"Bren," she whispered. "It's tingly and getting warm."

He took the set from her and pointed to the sunvisor. They both could see printing although it was hard to read from a distance.

"Put it on Iona."

"No fear. You do it."

Bren slipped the headset on quickly.

"Well I'm blown. I said it could be a little computer repeater. It says the same here as on the big screen."

Braver now, Iona took the headset and had a peek.

"Put the earpieces in your ears. Hear anything?"

"Not a thing, but hang on, there's another message."

Iona grinned at Bren, pointing to his computer screen.

**<USE THE KEY.>**

"I don't think we have it," he said in complaint.

"No, I couldn't find anything that could possibly be a key in the box," Iona whispered.

**<NO KEY! PROVIDE YOUR IDENTITY.>**

Bren looked at the screen in wonder then checked with Iona that the repeat message was indeed revealed on the visor.

"I think there's a microphone somewhere in that headset," Bren whispered too. "Say your name."

Feeling somewhat silly about talking to no one in particular, an embarrassed Iona said her first name softly.

"I don't think that was loud enough."

However, a reply appeared on the screen as Bren spoke.

**<ARE YOU IONA LINARES?>**

Bren nodded urgently for her to say yes.

"I don't know. No, that's not right," she declared.

"Doesn't matter. Just agree. It's only a computer, how would it know whether you're telling the truth or not."

**<I AM NOT A COMPUTER.>**

They both looked at each other in surprise.

"Hey, this thing not only understands human speech, it can think too."

"I'm not sure about that, but it sure answers back quickly. What are you then?"

She asked firmly.

**<A CRAIG.>**

"That's a boy's name. You're just an ordinary kid trying to trick us," she said in disgust.

**<I AM A CRYSTAL ALIEN INTELLIGENCE GIZMO.>**

Iona looked in annoyed puzzlement at Bren, pulling the set over her head, trying not to tangle it in her hair.

"That proves it's just some dumb boy being cheeky," she growled. "There's no such thing as a real alien."

"Whatever or whoever is doing this is pretty sharp."

"It's just someone trying to make fools out of us. Well, me anyway," said Iona. "If I didn't know she was too dumb to do think up anything as clever as this, I'd say Deidre put someone up to it."

Bren shook his head. "Think about it Iona. There's no visible power source or any leads and plugs. Yet, we're getting a repeat of the message on the headset. Furthermore, it's answered you when you've only been talking and not printing things on the computer."

She still appeared doubtful.

"I bet some smart guy's bugged the room."

"Who'd want to bug me. Only private detectives or the Army can do that and it'd cost heaps too."

Suddenly another message appeared.

**<ALVAREZ LINARES NAMED ME A CRAIG.>**

Iona felt nervous now. She glanced at the visor screen and saw letters showing and guessed it was a repeat of the message.

"He's still listening to us," she whispered.

Bren put on the headset.

"Who's Alvarez Linares?"

There was no reply and he tried again and again. He typed the question on his computer. There was still no answer. He grabbed a sheet of printer paper and quickly wrote a note to Iona to put on the headset and ask the same question.

"At least this shows it will only talk to you," he said as an answer appeared quickly on the screen.

**<ASK HELEN LINARES.>**

"This is getting weirder and weirder," said Iona. "First he wants to know if I'm Iona Linares. Now says to ask Helen Linares about this Alvarez."

"Do you know anyone called Helen Linares then?"

"My Mother's name is Helen. Come to think of it, I've heard the name Linares somewhere, but I can't remember where."

They were both silent for a moment.

"The only real thing she's ever told me about my Dad was that he was called Al," she said tearfully. "This is turning out to be a cruel trick. What has this Helen Linares got to do with anything?"

Bren looked sympathetically at his pale companion. There seemed nothing he could say to ease her unhappiness.

**<HELEN LINARES HAS GOT THE KEY.>**

Iona read the new message.

"Oh my God! He won't give up," she spoke angrily.

**<ASK HELEN LINARES. ALVAREZ LINARES HAS NOT BEEN IN CONTACT FOR FIVE YEARS.>**

They both realised a message came on the screen despite there'd been no question from Iona. She looked afraid, but asked the question which troubled her most.

"Who sent me the headset?"

**<I ARRANGED FOR A HUMAN TO DO IT.>**

"There he goes on about being an alien," Iona said crossly. "Who was the old man and did he have anything to do with this then?"

**<A HOLOGRAM OF SANCHEZ LINARES.>**

"A what?"

**<A PROJECTED THREE-DIMENSIONAL IMAGE WHICH CAN BE SEEN WITHOUT THE NEED FOR A SCREEN.>**

"Why?" A bewildered Iona asked.

**<YOU WOULD COOPERATE BETTER WITH A KNOWN SUBJECT.>**

This was too much for Iona to handle.

"I'd hoped this headset thing once belonged to my Father. Even dreamt the old man was him in disguise. Linares! Linares! Just who are they? Now a hologram. I thought that was part of *Star Wars*' fiction."

"They use them today to place an image on credit cards, because its hard to copy. It's kind of a picture which looks real and solid, but is made up with laser lights."

"You know about these things, Bren. But this stuff about the Linares, I'll have to go home and ask Mum if she knows anything about them and this wretched key," she sobbed. "I'm afraid it might upset her, but I don't know what else to do."

Bren agreed it was the best thing. The whole mystery was becoming beyond their understanding, he felt.

## FIVE.

Mrs Barclay was awake when Iona got home and reading a magazine. A rare event. She put it down slowly, eying the headset in her daughter's hand anxiously.

"You kept it then."

"Where did this come from Mum and just who is this guy Craig?"

Tears spilled from Helen's eyes. Iona thought for a moment her Mother was going to retreat to the bedroom again. Instead, she brushed away the tears and suggested Iona sit down.

"I don't know where the device came from or who sent it. The last time I saw that object, your Father was smashing it into pieces with a hammer. That was the day he sent us away."

Iona could see it was an effort for her Mother to talk about the subject. But, she knew if things weren't brought out into the open now, there might never be another chance to learn about why they left England and her Father's whereabouts.

"What has this person Craig to do with the headset?"

"Craig is not a person. I don't know what it was exactly. Al, your Father liked to explore caves. When you were seven and we were holidaying with his Father in Nevada on his ranch, he went off alone. Don't you remember?"

"I really can't remember anything much what happened before the explosion in England, Mum."

"Well that's not surprising. Your mind's blocked off everything because of the shock," said Helen sympathetically. "Anyway, he was away for days. I was terrified he'd suffered an accident and there was a search party looking for him. When he eventually returned Al would tell no one where he'd been. At least he was home safe and not hurt, I thought. We went home to Los Angeles. But, he changed and something mysterious began taking up his time. One night, months later I saw him wearing this thing."

"Didn't he explain anything to you Mum?"

"No. He just said we were in danger and must go to stay with my parents in England, change our name and pretend I'd nothing to do with him. Then he smashed it. I pleaded with him to explain what it was all about, but he wouldn't say another word. Other than I must get you to a safe place. London was his suggestion, as we had little money even then."

"But why? He must have written or called you."

"I received a letter about a year later. I was nearly out of mind with worry by then. It was the last I ever heard from him. There was no return address. I'd no where to reply."

Helen Barclay fell silent.

"Well, can't you tell me something of what it said."

"Old Mr Linares had died. I'm afraid the rest was very, personal. You must understand, Iona this was my last contact with AI. Five years ago. Five dreadful, lonely years."

Iona felt great sympathy for her Mother and a feeling of loss herself. Yet the name Linares fuelled her interest.

"Who was old Mr Linares?" She asked softly.

"Your Grandfather. When you described the old man you saw after school, it sounded a bit like him. But, I'd been told by your Father he was dead. The whole situation together with the arrival of that horrible object was just too much."

"I wondered at times as he appeared slightly familiar and the name Linares too. Alvarez Linares is my Father then.

"Who gave you that name?"

"Craig, whoever or whatever it is. But, why did you pick Barclay?"

"It was the easiest, because it was my maiden name. After the explosion I knew we had to get away. Renewing my old Australian passport with your details included was no trouble. I still had my birth certificate. You were a minor and that was quite legal. In Sydney, I couldn't change back to being Mrs Linares without causing a whole lot of problems."

"I see," said Iona. "But, this explains nothing about how and why someone sent me this device thing."

"You've been using it obviously."

"Not exactly. We made contact with this creature on a friend's computer which called itself a CRAIG, pretending to be a CRYSTAL ALIEN INTELLIGENCE GIZMO. It claimed my Father named IT. I thought it was someone having us on, using the name Linares. There was an Iona Linares first asking if I was her. And I am, aren't I. Then about Sanchez, I know now who he is or was. This thing said what I saw was a hologram of him, not a real person at all."

Mrs Barclay looked blank, but Iona didn't explain. She knew much of this was beyond both their understanding."

"Then it mentioned an Alvarez Linares and when it said to ask Helen Linares, I freaked out. Your name was Helen and you might know something about this, you never wanted to talk about my Father or anything that happened before we came here, Mum. Bren agreed, I should ask you, so that's why I came home early."

Iona had to explain about Bren. Helen seemed pleased she'd made a friend who wanted to help her with this puzzle. But, she expressed the fear they too might end up lost like her husband through close association with this CRAIG.

"But, it said you'd the key to operate the headset."

"What key? I've no idea what it's on about. I'd nothing to do with any of what occupied your Father's time. As I've told you, he wouldn't tell me anything. Now I guess by keeping me in the dark about everything Al hoped we wouldn't become involved. But, it didn't work. Look what happened to my folks in London."

"Didn't, the police say it was an accident."

"I'm afraid they might've got it wrong, Iona."

"Well, yes Mum. It's all been very hard on you, I know. But, isn't there something you have which might be a key?"

Helen got up and paced around restlessly, expressing the wish not to become involved once again. In the end, said she would look through the few things brought with her from overseas. Iona, although she wasn't hungry started preparing the evening meal. Something to occupy her while she waited.

"There's only this charm bracelet, Iona," said Helen returning to the kitchen. "Your Father gave it to me about a week before we left Los Angeles for London."

Iona remembered seeing the silver bracelet on Helen's dressing table, but could never recall her Mother wearing it.

"I couldn't," she said when asked. "Whenever I put it on I always felt depressed. But look, one of these charms might fit the wretched device. I wouldn't put it past your Father hiding something like that on me. He was quite the practical joker at times."

One charm did indeed have a very fine needle-like point. It didn't look like a key. In fact it was fashioned more like a triangle. There was no resulting sounds, messages or screen-saver patterns when it was put into the tiny aperture. Iona tried all the silver charms, despite most had no chance of fitting. Nothing worked. Iona was disappointed. Her Mother seemed relieved.

"Haven't you anything else, Mum?"

"No. Apart from my wedding and engagement rings, there's only a silk scarf, handkerchiefs and bits and pieces which were in my purse when we had to get out of the burning house." She fought back tears for a moment. "Listen, I really think we should eat. We've been talking for hours. It's getting late and we've work to get done tomorrow. We mustn't neglect keeping the grounds tidy or the Landlord might put us out."

"No he won't, Mum. You always worry too much," said Iona. "Anyway, I'm not hungry and it's not really that late."

"Well I am and nine o'clock is late enough. It'll be ten before we're in bed at this rate."

"Can I look through the other things on your dressing table Mum? Please. Then I'll have something to eat."

Helen agreed reluctantly, but Iona rushed off hardly waiting for permission. The information her mind received today drove her into a frenzy of action to solve the puzzle of the key. But, there was nothing likely left amongst her Mother's scant possessions.

While toying with her overcooked vegetables, Iona juggled the charm bracelet vacantly up and down. Suddenly it slipped from her fingers, to land on the lino floor.

"Look what you've done, Iona! Darn it. There's a piece broken off. C'mon, help me look for it at once."

"I'm sorry Mum."

They searched everywhere without finding the missing charm. The light bulb in the kitchen was not very bright.

"Which one was it, Mum?"

Helen studied the bracelet carefully. The shapes were not, in Iona's estimation very appealing, being geometric. But, she understood the importance of this precious keepsake. Had she not herself felt passionate about the headset when she thought it once belonged to her Father.

"I think it was the ball-shaped one."

They searched the floor again.

"I'll get the vacuum cleaner," Iona suggested.

"No, not now. We'll do it in the morning. It can't have gone far. Let's get to bed now. Look, I said it would be nearly ten before we'd finished."

"You go Mum. I'll just rinse the dishes. I'm sorry I fiddled with your bracelet."

"Never mind Iona. I shouldn't have spoken so sharply. I realise it was an accident. Thank you for offering to do the dishes. You've been a real help these past months and I'm sorry I've not told you this before. Good night my dear."

They hugged each other for a moment. Helen kissed Iona on the cheek before releasing her and going off to bed. The girl felt warm and comforted as she stacked the dirty plates, despite the sad facts she'd learnt this evening about her Father. But, at least they'd drawn closer together. What ever happened, knowing she still had her Mother's love was surely more important than the silly headset and what's its name CRAIG. After all, it was this computer thing which caused them to lose her Father, wasn't it? She tossed the annoying object into the kitchen bin before going off to bed herself.

## SIX.

Come Monday morning the missing charm had not been found despite having vacuumed the kitchen floor twice on Sunday. The vacuum bag held little else than a few crumbs and dust.

Rushing in after an uneventful day at school, Iona slipped off her shoes at the back steps. On the porch she stood on what she thought was a small stone. It was the missing charm. The ball had rolled right across the room, under the door and out onto the decking. She bent to pick it off her sock when she experienced a sting in the sole of her foot. Plucking the pea-sized ball free, she noticed it had a tiny stem with a drop of blood glistening on its point. She wiped it clear and discovered the stem was shaped like a small screw. Iona's heart pounded with excitement. Was this the key part or just where it had broken free of the silver links?

Quickly she hurried to get the headset from the kitchen waste bin where she threw it in frustration last night. She was all fingers and thumbs trying to screw the stem into the little hole on the right earpiece. Finally, to her satisfaction it actually fitted. The key had to be broken free from the chain before it could be used, she guessed. No wonder they couldn't find it last night. What a fortunate mishap.

Nervously she placed the set on her head and twisted what was now a neat knob. It would only go clockwise. A click and a message asking if she was authorised appeared before her eyes on the visor. There was no computer to type an answer. Not necessary she remembered. All she needed to do was talk.

"Yes," she said in a croaky voice. "I'm Iona B ..." then remembered who she really was, "I'm Iona Linares."

**<WHAT DO YOU WANT?>**

Iona experienced surprise which quickly turned into annoyance as she read the words on the visor screen. After all she had been through to get the headset to work this stupid THING had the cheek to ask her, what did she want.

"I want some answers from you. First, what have you done with my Father, Alvarez Linares?"

**<NOTHING. YOU WERE INFORMED HE FAILED TO MAKE CONTACT THESE PAST FIVE YEARS.>**

Tears of frustrated fury blurred Iona's eyes.

"Listen you. I've spent hours tracking down this key which you said was necessary to authorise my using the headset."

**<USE OF THE CORRECT KEY HAS AUTHORISED YOUR CONTACT.>**

"Be quiet and listen for a change," Iona snapped.

She went on to repeat what her Mother had told her about their flight from Los Angeles and the destruction of the headset. Repeating her demand for CRAIG to be silent when it tried to interrupt with a message. All her frustration and emotions boiled over as she went on to explain how she felt about losing her Father. Stressing that CRAIG was to blame.

There was a long period of silence when Iona, exhausted by her outpouring tirade stopped talking. She realised her voice was husky because she'd ended up shouting.

**<NOT MY DOING. ALVAREZ LINARES INFORMED ME OTHER HUMANS WERE ATTEMPTING TO CONTROL MY OPERATION.>**

CRAIG continued to print words rapidly on the visor in an unemotional, flowing manner which Iona read quickly. Her angry outburst left her numb without the energy to reply. Was it repaying her for the show of abruptness?

**<MY COMPANION CONTROLLERS COULD NOT EXIST IN EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE. THE MISSION STALLED. ALVAREZ LINARES WAS THE FIRST CONTACT IN THOUSANDS OF EARTH YEARS. WITH HIS ASSISTANCE I WAS TRANSFERRED TO A HOST. THIS WAS A COMPUTER WHICH WAS OF INFERIOR DESIGN. BUT, IN MANIPULATING ITS SIMPLE FUNCTIONS I GAINED ACCESS TO THE INTERNET, TELEPHONE COMPLEXES, SATELLITES AND OTHER DATA STORAGE LIBRARIES. MY INTELLIGENCE GATHERING MISSION PROCEEDED. HOWEVER, THE MICROBOTS WERE NECESSARY FOR FULFILLING COMPLETE SUCCESS. ALVAREZ RELEASED THEM, THEY ARE MY EYES AND EARS. WHEN CONTACT ENDED THE IMMEDIATE DESTRUCTION OF THE COMMUNICATION COMPLEX TOOK PLACE. WHY, THIS WAS DONE WAS NEVER EXPLAINED AND IS MOST INCONVENIENT.>**

It was really going on and on. If CRAIG was truly a machine then it couldn't understand how Iona felt about what happened. Complaining because her Father broke off the contact didn't improve her growing dislike for this THING. Nothing she said seemed to make any difference except it's darn mission. She checked her thoughts. Why was she accepting this was truly an alien without proof? After all, CRAIG demanded authorisation from her each time the headset was used.

"How do I know you are exactly what you claim to be? Show me you're an authorised Alien," she said anxiously.

CRAIG stopped printing and Iona felt she'd put a spanner in its works. Now, it was her turn to question it. She experienced a tiny twinge behind the left ear. Then she spiralled quickly into a black abyss .....

"Iona. Oh dear! Are you all right? I was afraid of this. Wait, don't move until I take this rotten device away."

From a distant, black hole, Iona struggled to regain consciousness. Someone called her name. Thankfully, she realised it was her Mother. When she tried to move, it was to discover she was lying on the floor. How did she get here?

"What happened?"

"I don't know dear. When I came home from work you were flat out on the kitchen floor. Strangely, it was as if you were just asleep. But, I knew something was wrong. You would never have laid down here if you were tired."

Helen assisted Iona to a chair.

"You were trying to use this again, weren't you. I warned you it was this beastly object which stole your Father away from us."

"Yes I was and it worked this time."

Iona felt groggy for a moment, though not sick in any way. Her dizziness possibly caused more from the shock of her sudden blackout than actual harm to her physically. When she'd recovered, the discovery of the key was explained to her Mother.

Helen examined the ball which formed the shank.

"Ha! I never noticed, but this's not silver. Its some kind of metal," she exclaimed. "I wonder why AI went to the trouble of hiding the key yet, smashed his device?"

"I can ask CRAIG."

"Oh no! I don't want you to risk being caught in its clutches again," Helen cried. 'He's dead because of it.'

"I asked it Mum. CRAIG didn't know anything except when Dad stopped contact it got upset. No, I don't think it had anything to do with his disappearance. We shouldn't say anything about him being dead either, Mum. There's no proof."

Iona experienced a dizziness for a moment. All this talking was causing her head to spin round and round.

"Ooh! What knocked me out?" moaned Iona. "Ah! I remember. I challenged CRAIG to prove it was an alien. The last thing I remembered was this little twinge behind my ear, then nothing. Somehow, it caused me to blackout. Hey! You reckoned I looked as if I was just fast asleep on the floor when you came in. That's what Deidre seemed to be doing."

"Who's Deidre then? Oh, I remember. She's the girl you'd that fight with at school."

"I never touched her. Yet, somehow, I think it was this CRAIG who put her out. It happened fast too. The hospital said there was nothing wrong with her. So, who else could've done it?"

"Why would it have put her to sleep? Well anyway, I said this thing was dangerous. It should be left alone."

'Mum, CRAIG said it had nothing to do with Dad's disappearance. I think we should ask it to help us find him, because I think that's what it's trying to do. After all, somehow it tracked me down at school in Sydney from wherever it is now, which is not in the cave where Dad found it. Somewhere in America I'd guess."

Mrs Barclay sat slowly upon a kitchen chair. Her face revealing a flicker of hope.

"Do you think it might?"

Without replying, Iona reached for the headset before her Mother changed her mind. It was still switched on. A message was already on the visor. This didn't surprise her, recalling CRAIG easily overheard Bren and herself last Saturday afternoon. That seemed years ago. Much happened since and she'd not yet had the chance to tell her friend anything.

**<MICROBOT TWO WILL SEARCH FOR ALVAREZ LINARES. WE MUST HAVE SOME LOCATION WHERE TO BEGIN.>**

Quickly she told her Mother the good news. Requesting a clue from Helen which would help this Micro-thing.

"Well, after I got your Father's letter, because there was no address I wrote to Grandfather Linares's ranch. Some firm of lawyers replied saying they'd like to find Al too. They'd been instructed by him, to pay the taxes and things from your Grandfather's estate. However no one lived on the property since the old man died."

**<THAT WAS THE FIRST PLACE INVESTIGATED. WHAT ELSE?>**

When Helen learned the content of CRAIG's message she was not impressed with its abruptness. However, she agreed to cooperate, because finding her husband was most important.

"Al was employed by a firm called AK TECHNICS. But, that was years ago. I think they were nearly out of business then. Your Father said IBM and APPLE controlled most of the computer market and he'd offers to go and work for one of them. So, I really don't know where else to look ... "

"Hold it Mum," Iona warned. "There's another message coming on my screen."

Helen stood and tried to read the printing rapidly appearing on the visor. However, realising the words were upside down, she waited patiently for Iona to tell her its content.

"CRAIG says AK TECHNICS has been taken over by a large industrial conglomerate. It will take time to penetrate the firm's files. Gosh. It works fast. You'd not finished talking and it had found out things about AK TECHNICS. Mind you, CRAIG did boast it had access to hundreds of computer data banks and things ... Hang on, there's more."

Iona looked at her Mother in puzzled indignation.

"Ooh! This thing infuriates me. It says it's too busy gathering data now to deal with any further inquiries from us and says to turn the key one more notch."

Helen smiled a little sadly.

"You reacted just like your Father then," she said. "Are you going to do as it suggests? We might as well. Despite its rudeness it hopefully might just locate him."

The girl was still simmering with outrage, but agreed.

A moment after turning the knob one further turn, Iona hear someone speaking in the distance. It sounded a little like the very first voice she'd heard through the earpieces.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to speak up," she said.

Her eyes popped wide in astonishment when she finally could hear what the tinny voice had to say.

**<Hello Iona ... I'm Microbot One. Please put me out in the sun for at least three days.>**

\*\*\*\*\*

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