



# MICROBOTS 3

## BY EL DEE.

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## ONE.

"Did you see that bit on the news about the big hole found yesterday in a farm pasture just north of Sydney?"

"Sorry. I didn't watch any TV last night."

Iona Barclay was not really listening to her friend Bren as she hurried to finish an English assignment before the class began. She tossed her soft, brown hair off her Elfin like features and studied the hand written page with dark eyes.

"Giving us that précis to do was pretty rotten of Mr James on a holiday weekend," the thirteen year old girl muttered. 'Dad took us up the North Coast to Forster in our new car and we didn't get back until late last night."

"Oh! What did he get in the end?"

"A Ford Falcon. Hang on until I finish this will you Bren."

Her fair headed classmate moved his wheelchair closer to Iona's desk. Bren Larsen couldn't sit at one and therefore used a small table which clamped to his chair. This gave him more freedom in class and he took advantage of it, moving about at will. That's, if the teacher didn't object. Mr James never complained about his star pupil.

"You've not written much," he said. "Deidre will have a field day if she catches you out."

"There. That's all I've time for. And I don't intend to let Miss Smarty Shoes see my homework," she snapped.

"Oops! A bit tired are we," Bren grinned. "Remember last time you caught Deidre out in English? If it wasn't for MIKE she'd probably bopped you one, she was so mad."

"Well I don't have to worry about that anymore or what her three creepy pals say or do either."

MIKE was Iona's secret as MIN was Bren's. They were microscopic robots, called Microbots from a distant star system who were stranded on Earth. No one apart from their parents knew of the Microbots' presence, except for Arnold Klien. He was in prison due to their direct intervention after he'd kidnapped Iona's parents.

In protecting the girl from the self appointed class leader, Deidre and her three special friends, MIKE left a cautionary warning in their minds. Now, none of the group ever came out openly against Iona. However, they still attempted sneaky tricks behind her back and of course indulged in malicious gossip. Especially about the friendship with the fourteen year old Bren.

Today was no different. Somehow, either Deidre or one of the others managed to stir up a small storm after the English lesson finished.

"Someone's taken my new compass," cried an annoyed girl.

"Mine too. Though it wasn't actually new. But, I need it for geometry today," said another.

A similar complaint came from several others as they waited for Ms Simmonds the Mathematics teacher. It was most unusual for her to be late. This very tall, slender woman, dubbed Skinny by her students was insistent on punctuality. No assignments or homework were ever accepted after the due date, while those who attended class late were not permitted into the room. Detention swiftly followed. Now she herself was truant.

The lost pairs of compasses were found, but not retrieved after one boy noticed where they could be seen. His companions spoilt the good Samaritan's act by giggling madly. The offended girls were not pleased to see them sticking to the ceiling. The sharp points made adequate arrows if handled properly. Unfortunately, they now appeared out of reach. A small uproar erupted.

"You wait guys, we'll find out who did this," cried one girl.

"Yeah, then'll you be for it," snapped the first victim.

"If anyone can arrange funny tricks around here, someone should ask Mouse."

"Right. She's often up to mischief."

The voices came from the back of the room and were raised against the swell of noise. Iona, who'd not been called this hateful nickname for many weeks stood up and looked hard at Deidre. It was Deidre who first christened the new girl with the label, because of her size and appearance. A case of mistaken identity, as Iona was far from being timid. However, the class leader assumed an innocent expression, while her particular three pals were not in view. They were sitting further back today and not in their usual seats. It seemed they might be planning something. Was this going to be another one of their sly attempts to discredit her?

The hubbub lessened for a moment. Everyone expected a confrontation. It'd been a while since the smallest, youngest member of the class clashed with Deidre. Just then a harassed Ms Simmonds rushed into the room.

"What's going on?"

But, before anyone had the time to make a reply she wanted to know why no one was preparing for the lesson.

"Sit down Iona. Now, get out your compasses."

Of course this started a series of complaints. Ms Simmonds was horrified when her attention was drawn to the hanging array of compasses adorning the ceiling.

"Who's responsible? Come on! Someone must know who pulled this stupid stunt," she demanded.

"Iona."

The muffled voice spoke quietly from the back of the room again. Fortunately for the accused, it was not heard by the teacher. Iona did and realised she had to protect herself. Pulling her baseball cap near her mouth, she asked MIKE to intervene and retrieve the compasses. He did swiftly. Most landed point down on one desk, Deidre's. She shrieked in alarm which gained her sympathy from the Math's teacher seeing the quite lethal objects surrounding the girl.

After the compasses were claimed, Ms Simmonds quickly got on with the lesson. Perhaps her own tardiness and the wasted time caused her to ignore the event. Iona wondered if MIKE had carried his instructions further and brought about the reprieve. But, she was sure the deed had been planned by Deidre, although there was now nothing she could do about it. However, the sight of the pale faced girl, encircled by shimmering arrows went a long way in bringing some satisfaction to the victim.

During lunch break, Bren raised the subject of the hole in the ground again, but wisely ignored the flight of the compasses. He could guess what really happened. The two usually ate apart from the others. Not to be unfriendly, but because their classmates preferred the sunny grass areas. These were hard to get to places for the wheelchair. However, there were occasions in the past when privacy was important. Especially during the time Iona's parents were abducted by Arnold Klien and afterwards when they searched for another intruder from out of space.

"What's so important about this hole?"

"Nothing really, except it was cut in the shape of an isosceles triangle ... "

"I know. This one's got two equal sides," Iona interrupted.

"Gee whiz. I didn't know how well you paid attention to my Maths lessons, especially on triangles."

Using maths and the distances separating three underwater drones forming an equilateral triangle and by plotting the centre which led them to locating the hiding place of an alien Android. It was involved in finding a method how to steal and transport Earth's fresh water to its home planet.

"Never mind the hole, but thinking about that triangle reminds me, I haven't told you what Dad's been doing."

"He hasn't brought old CRAIG back into action, has he?"

CRAIG was the mainframe of an alien super computer that self-destructed when abandoned on Earth. It and the Microbots came from a World Iona named M9 , which was somewhere in the Milky Way.

"Oh no! Mum'd have a fit. MIN helped him find some special tools and they plugged into ANDY's memory."

Bren named the Android ANDY when it was captured by MIKE on a tiny island in the Pacific. Unfortunately, like CRAIG it too became inactive. Not through self destruction, but an exhausted power supply.

"Was there any more information about the A-niners?" He asked. "Mind you it sounds as if we're talking about those Grade nine groupies, rather than Outer Space visitors."

"You don't reckon Deidre and her gang might be A-niners?"

"That's not very kind of you, Iona," Bren laughed.

"Then, why're you laughing your head off?"

"Cos' you've got that Mousy look."

"BREN!"

"Okay. Okay. Just testing your reaction time. Well, what did you discover about A9 ?"

A9 was the name they gave to the Android's home Planet while calling the occupants A-niners. This was a distant World desperate for water as its own become too polluted. It was believed to be also somewhere within the Milky Way.

However, Bren was curious how Mr Barclay managed to control MIN. The Microbot he liked to think was his special responsibility. Before he could ask, Iona's reply made him feel ungenerous. After all, Al Barclay was not a well man. A result of his years of illegal imprisonment when hiding the whereabouts of CRAIG from Arnold Klien, the unscrupulous man wishing to gain control of the M9 aliens so he could rule the World.

"We haven't tried to get it yet. Dad thought you'd like to be there when we did. How about this Saturday afternoon? And don't worry if your Mum can't bring you. He'll slip round in the Falcon."

"That'll be great, Iona. But, back to this hole. You know there were no tyre tracks or signs anywhere showing where the machinery used to dig it might've been, except a black circle where the grass had been scorched. Strange there were no clumps of dirt or mess left around the hole either. It's got everyone puzzled."

Except Iona. She was not really interested, but knew Bren was always curious. Perhaps, due to being crippled from the waist down through a car accident he spent more time listening and reading than others. However, he also had a keen mind. He was the brainiest person she'd ever known.

"Maybe it was dug by a tidy man with a spade and an a wheelbarrow which floated on an air cushion," she suggested jokingly.

"Impossible. The hole would've held tons of dirt. Too large for one man to dig on his own," said Bren seriously.

"Would you believe two giants with enormous spades and huge wheelbarrows."

"You aren't interested in this are you, Iona."

"Sorry Bren. But, I've had enough of puzzles these past weeks. What with hunting for Mum and Dad and then the fright over the possibility of war with another World, I'd like to live a normal, quiet life. You know, work out how we could use MIKE and MIN to help people."

"How can having a couple helpful Microbots at your command be considered normal, Iona?"

The Microbots, although tiny and invisible to the naked eye had super powers. They moved at light speed, could report, research or record events visually and with sound. Capable of understanding the Earth's languages. Both able to retrieve or place information in computers and all other communication systems when requested. That they could sometimes influence the behaviour of living creatures was the most outstanding of their abilities. Directing people depended rather on that person's attitude. Guilty folk were easily persuaded into doing things. This capability would've been dreadful for humankind if it wasn't for the fact, they respected life. Indeed, were programmed to react strongly against those who endangered plants, animals and humans.

MIKE and MIN had one weakness, which happened when they came into contact with water. This caused their crystals to dissolve. These were the source of their power, replenished from the sun's rays. However, the tiny cells didn't last for ever and needed to be replaced depending upon the Microbots level of activity. Something they couldn't do themselves. Neither were they able to store large reserves of solar energy. Therefore their use needed to be monitored carefully.

"Yes. I'm probably being silly thinking we'd ever be back to normal again as long as we've got MIKE and MIN around."

"And that'll depend upon how many of those crystals are left in the Controller's store," said Bren thoughtfully.

The Controllers who planned the expedition to Earth from M9 couldn't survive here. Their supplies however, were retrieved by the Microbots and kept in Iona's house.

"Perhaps we'd better get MIN to make a check.

"Yes, it'd be difficult to find them if they ran out of steam somewhere. We'd probably look weird running around with those funny goggles on, calling, Hey MIKE, where are you MIN?" Bren joked.

"You've got to take this seriously, Bren."

There was no time for more discussion on the matter as the school bell summoned them back to classes.

## TWO.

"How're you going to retrieve the data Mr Barclay if ANDY can't talk anymore?"

"MIN's doing that, Bren. And now we each have a headset, it'll be easier for her to print a report for us all at once," said AI.

Bren noticed Mr Barclay wearing the headset with a blue coloured visor when he arrived after his Mother dropped him off. Iona and he also had sets. While theirs were concealed beneath baseball caps and could be worn in public, AI wore his quite openly.

"Were there any other sets left, MIN?"

***<I've not found any spares, Bren. There were only ever four Controllers, who had one each.>***

The reply was printed out on the small sunvisors attached to each headset. They were in reality, not for protecting the wearer from the sun, but small screens. MIN couldn't speak like MIKE. Her method of communication was through writing. This could appear fairly quickly before the eyes of any wearing one of the alien sets or slower on a computer monitor. Tiny earphones were used to hear MIKE. Hanging from the right earpieces, alongside the wearers' cheek bones to just above the mouth were wire microphones. So tiny to be almost invisible to any observer. These were used to make contact with either MIKE or MIN or others with a set. Without such devices humans were unable to talk to the Microbots.

"What about the crystals MIN?"

***<I'm sorry Iona, AI was unable to help me look.>***

Microbots had no limbs. When seen through a microscope or the alien, goggle shaped viewer, they looked like single living cells, not machines. Human assistance was needed at times. Searching for supplies in the Controllers' storage container required someone to turn the shelves while MIN studied the M9 language to find what each held. She was the only one of the robots who could read.

This container was actually a time-shifted receptacle. That's, until an item was selected and its case taken out, the contents were held in time-space on a shelf. They then expanded to their right size. In fact the humans were amazed at the number of shelves which appeared at the top and when flipped over, seemed to disappear into a bottomless pit. The box itself didn't look very big at all. There were many things which were puzzling and complicated about the Microbots. Often beyond explanation. Therefore few questions were asked of them as the answers were often difficult to understand.

Occasionally Bren's curiosity got the better of him. This tested Iona's patience sometimes, especially when trying to move along quickly. He was interested in how they were getting the inactive Android's information while the girl wanted to actually read the data.

"Please Bren," she pleaded. "Let's see what there's to find in ANDY's memory. Thinking back on its snooty attitude and as it was only programmed to study how to steal our water, there probably won't be much information. By the way, I'll give you a hand later on MIN in looking for the crystals."

**<I thank you Iona for the gift. However, giving me your hand still will not be of assistance. I've no arm to put it on. Could you turn the shelves instead?>**

"Oops! I forgot they were still confused about slang language," Iona laughed with the others.

**<Did MIN make a joke?>**

"Now look what's happened. You've gone and got MIKE excited," said Al. "We must remember when dealing with the Microbots they need exact instructions."

**<I'm sorry Al. I thought you all laughed because MIN was trying Earthling humour. We thought it was something missing in our relationship with you.>**

"Oh dear me, MIKE. There's nothing missing from our association. I think we get along fine. Don't you two agree?"

"Yes Mr Barclay."

"And considering they're machines, it's really great how things work out, Dad."

"Robots Iona."

"I knew that Bren."

"Hey! We agree don't we," said Al. "Whether you want to call them robots or machines, MIKE and MIN are something special. Truly out of this World. You know who invented the word robot?"

Neither Iona or Bren had any idea. However, they looked at each other, guessing they were about to be given a lecture. Not that they minded, but there were times when it would've been more appreciated if Al didn't. They'd both been waiting patiently to learn something more about the alien Planet A9 .

"The idea of robots goes back to ancient times. Stories were told of mechanical beings brought to life. Then there were the clockwork figures found in some churches built during the Middle Ages. These were called automatas. Later on in the 18th century clever clockmakers constructed full size creations which walked. Life size dolls for rich children. Today the term automatum is used mainly to explain those artificial devices that can imitate the

motions of living things. Some of the so-called robots seen on television advertising are automata, even when controlled by remote radios. Now, when they become electromechanical and self propelled, then we're getting closer to what we've here, that is an android."

Now AI had their full attention as he continued speaking.

"It was the writer Karel Capek who's believed to first use the word robot. It came from the Czech word *robota*, meaning compulsory labour. His play R.U.R., short for *Rossum's Universal Robots*, was about devices which looked human. However, they lacked feelings. Later, robots like this were called androids. Either electromechanical or made entirely of real living materials. This is sometimes called nanotechnology. Of course this is only in the imagination of science fiction writers. But, we now know differently such machines are possible, though not of earth design."

Iona's Father was not wasting their time, they now realised. He was trying to explain where both ANDY the Android and the Microbots might fit into their world.

"Many things once considered to be imaginary, have since become real," and went on to give an example. "Jules Verne, a French author who lived well over a hundred years ago wrote stories which frightened some people. One was about a journey to the Moon and another about a submarine that travelled deep into the sea. Things we now take for granted."

"Do you think Mr Barclay, those old stories might've been because someone actually saw a real robot? Even this Jules Verne."

"Yes Dad. ANDY told us there was an expedition on Earth from A9 hundreds of years ago and it arrived here about the time that chap was writing his stories," said Iona.

"What about the little boy they captured in England. You know the one their scientists used as a copy for ANDY. When he was released he might've remembered being caught by the A-niners and told someone," Bren suggested.

"Ah yes. It's all fascinating stuff," AI sighed. "But, will we really ever find out the whole truth of the matter."

"Let's get MIN to look into ANDY's memory," Iona suggested. "There might be something in there."

Everyone agreed and AI asked the Microbot to tap into the data bank via the cable they'd attached. A moment later she gave them the disappointing news. There was nothing about the visit to Earth other than what it revealed when captured.

"What about the A9 World?" Bren asked.

**<The Planet Aquanovem ... >**

"Call it A9 MIN," said Iona. "Aquanovawhatcha'callit is too much of a mouthful."

"So's Aquanovawhatcha'callit too," muttered Bren.

**<A9 is found within the star cluster of the Milky Way ... >**

"Hey! I thought it was called a galaxy."

"BREN!"

"Sorry Iona."

"Star cluster or galaxy, it doesn't matter. Both terms mean the same thing," said Al. "But, let MIN get on with it you two."

**<It's a small planet in a two star system nearly one hundred light years from Earth. Ninth in position from the double suns. In comparison with Earth it would only be one tenth the size. For millions of years its surface was completely covered with fresh water. The population were gilled creatures. Unfortunately, they bred too rapidly . Overcrowding eventually polluted the water and most died.>**

"What else?"

**<That's all in this section we had not already learnt from the Android's explanation, Al. Do you wish me to read the next? It covers much of the scientific data about it's mission to transfer water and appears very interesting.>**

"Oh no!" Iona groaned. "How boring."

"Well, it might have some importance ... "

"Bren! You wouldn't want to hear all that, surely."

"Only kidding, Mr Barclay. Just wanted to see Iona's face," he grinned. "But, I'd like to know how long a light year is."

"Well, the linear distance if measured in kilometres is if I remember correctly, approximately the number 9461 followed by nine noughts."

"Wow! Let's see. That's a thirteen digit number. That'd make a 100 years times ... "

"Okay Einstein. Enough Maths for now," Iona interrupted.

"Right, you two. Let's see what other topics MIN can find."

**<Most of the other sections cover the Android's results of its observations and experiments. There is only one topic left.>**

"Well. Go on MIN," said Al.

It was most unlike one of the Microbots to stop reporting without finishing. In fact, MIN's silence worried the humans.

"What's up MIN?" Bren asked.

"MIKE," said Iona. "Please check MIN for us."

**<She's perfectly all right, Iona. However, she's concerned whether or not this information is what you want to know.>**

"What is it?"

**<I don't know what it is, Iona. I can't read like MIN.>**

"Sorry MIKE. I forgot that. Ask her to tell us and then we can make up our own minds."

**<How will you know then whether or not you wanted to learn this information, Iona. It will be too late, because you'll already know what the data is about.>**

"MIKE!"

**<Oops! I'll ask her straight away, Iona.>**

"Gee. Dealing with them can be so infuriating at times," said Bren. "But, they're sure lots of fun."

"True," Iona agreed. "Better than some others I know."

"You couldn't mean Deidre and Co."

"Hullo. Talking about some of your classmates. That's not the way to make friends you know," Al said. "Hold it now though. Here comes MIN's reply."

**<While on Earth five hundred years ago, the first observation team discovered evidence other Outer Spacers had been in some places before them.>**

"They must've seen where your Controllers had been, MIN."

**<No Bren. The Controllers never landed anywhere except in Nevada. That was thousands of years earlier. These visitors were other Space Travellers. Possibly from somewhere within the Milky Way too. But, there were more recent signs which the Android suggests they had returned to Earth twenty years ago.>**

"What signs MIN?"

**<The data recorded here relates to the Android's sightings of what you refer to as UFOs, Al.>**

"Are there any actual details MIN?"

**<No Iona.>**

"What do you or MIKE know about UFOs MIN?" Al asked.

**<Nothing. Only the data collected from human records.>**

"Well then, ANDY could've have been just as mistaken as a humans have been over UFOs. Nothing's been proven despite hundreds of reports. We know it couldn't be the Controllers' ship and ANDY said it was destroyed on the Moon. So let's not worry yet," Al suggested.

Everyone agreed nothing could be gained by worrying about things which lacked real evidence.

"How come these aliens don't know about each other?" Iona complained. "We know about the places in our solar system."

"I think it's too big an area out there in space for anyone to know everything."

"You're right Bren," said Al. "The nearest star from Earth is actually a triple star called Proxima Centauri. Some forty trillion kilometres away. The Microbots could reach it in four and a quarter light years, if their crystals lasted that long. But, this is only the edge of the cluster," said Al. "The Milky Way is considered an enormous spiral shaped galaxy, which astronomers estimate to be about 10000 light years thick."

"Ooh! With all that figuring out. I don't think I'd want their job. I'm not that keen on Maths. I can see why it's easier to talk about light years rather than kilometres though. But, it would suit you, Bren You're always going on about numbers."

"Thanks Iona, but no thanks. I like my amounts smaller. These figures are just too big to understand properly."

The young couple left Iona's Father tinkering with the new tools. Although they were of alien design, Al Barclay's old skills at computer engineering helped him find out how to operate them. His imprisonment left him not only with ill health, but well behind in the latest developments in technology. Something he wished to catch up on when he got better. Now, the possession of these fine instruments and with MIN's aid in deciphering the old Controller's manuals he'd the chance to achieve his ambition without going back to College to study.

"Your Dad seems happy now he's got something to do, Iona. He's real keen to start up his own computer repair business. Not that there'll be too many machines like CRAIG and ANDY to be fixed."

"Mum's worried he'll have a relapse if he does too much and has rung the doctor for his advice."

"I think it's really a case of wanting to have things to do which he wants more than setting up a business," said Bren. "I know when I'm confined to bed and not allowed near my computer or even go to school, things get boring. You soon become fed up."

Bren's disability often caused him great pain. So much, he was not able to always sit comfortably in the wheelchair. He rarely complained about this Iona noted.

Just then Mrs Larsen arrived to collect her son.

### THREE.

The following Saturday Iona paid a visit to the Larsens. Bren met her at the door as she parked her bike by the front steps.

"We'll have to wait outside for a while," he said. "Mum's having a fit over some mess in the lounge She won't let me in."

The day was cold but fine and neither minded being banished from inside for the moment.

"Remember what I said about a relapse?"

"Your Dad's not bad again is he?" Bren asked.

"I'm afraid so. You know its hard to realise it's been only ten weeks since I found him in that cell in Arnold Klien's underground garage. He really hasn't had much time to get better yet."

"Yes. We've certainly been busy since the beginning of term. What caused him to have the relapse?"

"He got himself involved fiddling around with ANDY all week while Mum was at work. He was too exhausted to eat properly at night. Now he's back on his old program the Doctor said. No more than a couple of hours morning and afternoon on his feet."

"Whew. That'll make him cranky."

"Sure will. He'd made some progress too."

"What was that, Iona?"

"He managed to put me in contact with the Android again."

"Oh, yes Master and no Master stuff eh! Did it say anything else important?" Bren laughed.

"Okay. Cut it out, Bren. You're just jealous you don't have your own Android. It didn't actually talk, just allowed me to read some of its memory relayed to the PC's monitor."

**<What would you want Bren to cut out, Iona?>**

"Oh crikey! Are you listening to everything we say, MIN?"

**<No Iona. It's just MIKE is in trouble.>**

Iona and Bren were immediately concerned. Perhaps, if they'd not been wearing their caps because of the cold they may've missed MIN's message.

"What's up with him?"

**<He's not up anywhere, Bren.>**

"MIN! Tell us what's wrong with MIKE," Iona snapped.

**<Sorry. I was trying on a joke, Iona.>**

The humans were so worried about MIKE, they didn't see anything funny in MIN's reply.

**<It's just he did what Helen Barclay asked him to do. Now, she's cross with him.>**

Iona looked at Bren in amazement.

"What did she get him to do and how? Hang on. Forget about the last bit," said Iona anxiously.

**<Clean out your study, Iona.>**

"Oh know! "

"Did he clean it all out?"

**<Yes Bren, everything in the room.>**

"Oh no! Mike took her at her word and took out every solitary thing. Computer, carpet, furnishings and I suppose CRAIG and the Android too. Well that'll please her," she sighed.

"We'll need the Controller's box for your crystals, MIN," said Bren urgently. "Where did he put it all. Surely he can get them back."

**<At your place. Your Mother was not pleased either. He had to return it and put in Iona's garage.>**

"Now we know what all the fuss was about when you arrived, Iona. I'd better go and see if everything's all right now."

"Why's my Mum still angry then MIN?"

**<The carpet and curtains were destroyed in the moving. In fact the materials went up in flames and now there is nothing left of them.>**

"Oh dear. This is not going to improve things at home."

"What things Iona?" Bren asked on his return.

Iona quickly told Bren about the loss of the study's soft furnishings. Then asked about the state of the Larsen's lounge.

"It's okay now. But, gee Mum's angry. This is a bit more complicated than it appears, Iona. We're going to have to talk with both our Mothers."

"Why?"

"I think they've got the idea the Microbots might've been used to take over their household chores."

Just then a red-faced Joyce Larsen appeared dressed for going out. She informed Iona and Bren she'd rung the Barclays and they were expected there shortly.

While the wheelchair was loaded into the station wagon, Iona biked home quickly, arriving ahead of the Larsens. Both her parents were waiting, grim-faced. Why the adults were looking so serious was revealed when everyone gathered in the lounge.

"These robot things have to go!"

"Indeed," Joyce agreed with Helen Barclay.

"But why?" Iona pleaded.

"Those alien machines are dangerous. They don't understand anything about humans and therefore will eventually cause someone to be hurt seriously one day," said an angry Helen.

"Even killed," said an equally annoyed Joyce.

"Look how my carpet and curtains just burnt up. There's not a scrap left," Helen snapped.

"One can soon imagine what would happen to anyone who was treated like that by those THINGS."

"Oh! Come on Mum," said Bren patiently. "The Microbots are very respectful of living creatures. They'd never hurt anyone or anything on purpose."

"You shouldn't have tried to control them," Iona accused the women. "You know they can understand you. But, without the headsets it's not possible to see if the Microbots fully understand what's expected of them."

"Do you think we're both idiots, Iona!" Helen cried. "You're not the only ones who can learn how to use a computer."

"So. That's how you managed to get MIKE to try his hand at housework," said Al Barclay from his armchair. "But, you didn't know he can't read. There was no chance he'd understand your instructions."

"You keep out of this Al dear. The doctor said your health will not improve unless you rest and don't worry about things."

Al shrugged his shoulders and appeared to agree with his wife. He said nothing further as both women laid down the rules.

The Barclay's PC was to be permitted in the spare room once new carpet and curtains were arranged. The alien trash as CRAIG, the Controllers' box and ANDY the Android were classed were to be locked in the garage cupboard along with the headsets. Neither Iona or Bren were ever to touch anything again.

There was dead silence in the room after the women finished speaking. The teenagers were dumbfounded. Especially when told if they did disobey these instructions, both would be banned from using the computers.

"But Mum," Iona tried to explain. "It was MIKE and MIN who found you and Dad and arranged a rescue when Arnold Klien held you prisoner in Los Angeles ... "

"Not another word Iona," Helen snapped. "You forget it was that wretched CRAIG thing which caused your Father to be imprisoned in the first place. Just remember the years we spent alone and," her eyes filled with tears. "Look what happened to your Grandparents."

This was something Iona couldn't deny. Arnold Klien's men in an effort to seize control of the aliens, caused both the elder Barclays untimely death several years ago in England. It was this act which caused Mother and Daughter to flee to Sydney, Australia.

"Both Joyce and I are aware that no one should learn of these things being on Earth. We're agreed they're too dangerous for humans to handle anyway. That's why there's to be no contact with them. Not even through your computers either. They managed to survive quite all right for hundreds of years in that cave in Nevada with out anyone's help. So they'll be okay on their own."

"But, if the Microbots don't have their crystals replaced, they'll just die!" Bren said in dismay.

"Don't be silly Bren," said his Mother. "They're only machines, not living beings. It's not as if anyone's going to hurt them."

There was no help coming from Al and both Iona and Bren had to comply with their Mothers' orders.

## FOUR.

The last week at school before the winter holidays began, loomed unhappily ahead for the two friends. A fortnight's vacation without the Microbots appeared dismal too.

"Well, that solves your problem about getting back to normal, Iona."

"That's not exactly what I meant. I did so want to get MIKE to help people."

However, Iona recalled the first attempt she made. Coming home from school it was thought a neighbour was being burgled. A man was climbing a ladder onto the first floor balcony. MIKE was dispatched to delay him while she rushed for help. Unfortunately it was the elderly lady's son, assisting his Mother who'd locked herself out.

"But, how Iona? You know we've got to be careful giving them instructions."

"That's right. But, remember when MIKE placed our parents into gentle comas so we could sneak out and hunt for the A-niners?"

"Sure."

"Well, each time Dad awoke he was so refreshed he had no trouble. I mean, sick people need lots and lots of rest. Now, if we could've got MIKE or MIN to put them under in the hospitals at night, wouldn't it help them get better quicker?"

"What if they couldn't get back in the mornings to wake them up? It could be raining or something else which might stop them."

"No. You've forgotten what happened the first time we saw MIKE zap someone. You know Deidre, that was before we'd found about him. I mean she ended up in hospital and had all those tests. But she woke up by herself a few hours later."

"Yeah. But, now she's got that cautious effect. You know, like nervous when you're around and won't even talk directly to you, right."

"Heck. I forgot about that."

"And there's Margot, Lurline and Bella too. They've been affected as well. What about old skinny Simmonds in Maths last week? It was not like her to give up on the compass thing. She'd usually follow that right through to the bitter end. Are you sure MIKE didn't zap her too after he brought them down?"

"He might've. But, it was neat how he scared Deidre. I'm going to miss him and MIN, I'm afraid."

"You're not the only one. But, are there any others I don't know about?"

"I think those three idiots who pinched my cap were too."

"Sound like half the class," Bren laughed.

Just then the three boys under discussion appeared and passed snide comments about the whereabouts of the headware. The caps, displaying promotions for sporting teams

and had become a familiar part of Iona and Bren's appearance lately. Wayne Amos and Jason, addressed the remarks to Bren. Probably still wary of the girl.

"Hey Bren. You given up on the Eels," said Wayne. "Guess I would've too after the way they've been playing."

The Eels were Bren's favourite football team. Their correct name was Parramatta. Surprisingly Amos cautiously poked fun about Iona's basketball team, the Sydney Kings.

"Doesn't look as if the Kings are popular either and whatcha' doing for music anyway now you've lost your set?"

Amos spotted the concealed headset when tossing Iona's cap to his mates and had been curious about it ever since.

"Watch it Amos," Jason joked. "She might hex y'all."

But, the boys failed to get a rise out of either Iona or Bren. After a couple more pointless remarks they wandered off in search of other prey.

"I'd like to truly hex them if MIKE was here," Iona muttered.

"They're just goons. But, pretty harmless. They don't mean any serious harm. It's best to ignore them."

"Say Bren," said Iona seriously. "You don't think our Mothers were affected in some way when MIKE put them into comas?"

"Crikey! That might be the reason why they got so cross about the Microbots. It's a pity we aren't able to ask MIKE and MIN about this caution effect. You know, how it works."

"Yes. It's a great pity. But, thinking about it now," said Iona thoughtfully. "Gee. If that's what happens all the time, it's probably better we haven't tried to help people. There'd be some in real trouble. Although, it hasn't seemed to hurt Dad."

"I dunno'. I thought he might've said something in the Microbots' defence. But, being sick we shouldn't expect much from him."

"He wasn't too sick to get MIKE to shift CRAIG's mainframe and the other things into the cupboard along with both our headsets."

"Are you sure they stayed with the caps?"

They both tensed for a long moment. Looked at each other then shook their heads sadly. In the past the Microbots, if they wanted to contact either of them would tickle behind their ears as a signal.

"No. They're still locked up. The only way they could get out is to burn through the cupboard. It's only wood. No problem if they were as nasty as our Mums reckon," said Bren.

"MIKE and MIN would do as Dad told them. They're honest and obedient," Iona said passionately. "Why can't our Mothers see that?"

"Yes. They're certainly not dangerous," Bren paused and reconsidered. "Well, then again. I suppose if you don't explain carefully what you want, accidents can occur. Look what happened to the carpet."

That was typical of Bren, Iona thought. Always reasonable about things, while she could only feel annoyance.

"Fancy considering them to be like ordinary robots. You know like the ones that have been shown vacuuming and cleaning on TV science programs," she complained. "Maybe one day they'll be available to buy, but never like MIKE and MIN."

Once again they were both silent for several minutes as if waiting for either of the Microbots to interrupt and converse with them. Lunch breaks would never be the same they agreed. Neither would school. Everything seemed so ORDINARY.

She looked at her friend. He seemed to be coming to grips with what had happened and returning to his old self. Bren was usually tolerant of other's shortcomings. Always friendly and patient too. It was no wonder he was the class favourite, especially with the girls. Indeed, she was fortunate to have him to herself so often. After all, she was smaller than the other girls and to her way of seeing herself, not at all attractive. In fact, rather thin and scrawny. Possibly mousy looking, as Bren occasionally teased. If it was not for his handicap she knew he'd be swamped with other company.

Just as if their classmates knew the Microbots were no longer around, Deidre, Margot, Lurline and Bella approached the two silent companions.

"Er. Bren," Deidre spoke carefully, not looking at Iona. "You wouldn't mind if we asked you to look over our Chemistry assignment."

"Sure. Where is it?"

"Well, actually we'd rather do it in the library. It's kinda awkward to spread out here in the open," said Lurline.

"Gee whiz Bren. You'd be a great help I know," Margot simpered. "You see, we just can't seem to get the right formula to solve a couple of the equations."

"Here," said Bella. "I'll push your wheelchair over the grass to the library. It'll be quicker that way."

Without a word to Iona the group whisked their prize away. However, she was so depressed the deed failed to upset her further. It was if the girl had reached the greatest depth of despair. Now she was all alone.

Late that night, Iona found it hard to sleep again. It was only three days since her Father had locked the aliens in the garage cupboard. Restlessly, she tossed and turned until eventually the bed blankets became a tangled mess. She got out and switched on the light to remake it. A light knock came on the door. It was her Dad.

"May I come in? I knew you were awake. I could hear your bed squeaking."

"Sorry. Did I wake Mum too?"

"No. She's out to it after taking a pill. You didn't really wake me, Iona. I was waiting for the chance to explain a few things to you."

"Dad. You don't have to explain anything. All I want is for you to get better," she said.

"Oh. I'll arrange that. But, there's something I'd like to discuss with you about the aliens, especially MIKE."

"Yes. What about MIKE?"

"I fear you were becoming too attached to him and dependent on his aid in almost everything you were doing lately."

For a moment Iona was stunned. Was this true?

"Is that why you agreed with Mum?"

"Not exactly. There's something else which is a bit delicate, something your Mother would've liked to tell you. But, she's embarrassed and rather upset at present. In fact she's very worried what you'll think about it all."

"What's wrong Dad!"

"Nothing's wrong, really. Well, I suppose it depends on how one looks at it," Al appeared embarrassed himself.

Iona felt her Father was stalling. She felt herself panicking. Was there something seriously wrong with her Mother which would explain her strange behaviour?

"Oh Dad!" Iona cried. "What's wrong with Mum. Is she ill?"

"Shush now, Iona. You'll wake your Mother. It's not like that all," he said quietly.

Iona lowered her voice to almost a whisper. She was becoming really concerned there was something wrong.

"Dad. Tell me the truth, please.

"It's just that she's er! Going to have a baby!"

The girl felt the worry feeling lift suddenly.

"But, that's fantastic," cried the relieved girl. "Oops! I hope I haven't woken her up when I shouted."

They both held their breaths for a moment.

"No. I think she's asleep still. Now you pop off too and I'll see you in the morning. I'm so glad you're not upset."

But, sleep was still hard to come for Iona. How could she, she was so excited instead of upset and angry.

## FIVE.

"Are you really happy about the baby, Iona?"

It was Saturday morning. Exactly one week after being forbidden to have anything to do with the Microbots.

"Of course Mum. It'll be great to have a sister or brother and I'll be able to help you look after her."

"It seems you've decided on what you'd prefer already," said Al with a smile.

"Oh!. Not really Dad. The 'her' bit just slipped out."

"I'm sorry, I'd not told you before. But, we were not sure until after the tests and things."

"That's okay Mum. I understand."

"Yes. That's another thing. I was so confused when I found out. You know, being an older Mum and what you'd think about it, that I became up tight. Then, Joyce, that's Bren's Mother and I got the crazy idea all our household worries could be handled by those robot things. Silly of us really."

"Well ... "

"No. You don't have to be so understanding. Your Father's put me right about how things are truly with you and this er! MIKE. But, I can't get used to the idea of calling it a him. However, I've discussed it with Mrs Larsen and we're going to try not to interfere again."

"You mean I can have my headset back," cried Iona.

"Yes Dear. There's just one thing."

"Sure Mum. Anything."

"When Dad's better he'll want the garage. So, we're having a wall unit delivered next week for the study. Could you please have your MIKE put all the alien things in it, out of sight. I'm afraid if I've to keep looking at that CRAIG creature and the other one that looks like some weird, little boy, I'll really have a nervous breakdown."

"Right. That'll be no trouble."

"Mind you, eventually we'll have to convert the study into a nursery for the baby."

"That'll be okay. The unit and PC can go in my room. There's plenty of room," said Iona happily.

"Oh! There's something else too."

"What's that Mum?"

"Please do take care when you're with this MIKE," she stressed. "I'm still a little afraid you might get yourself into trouble like your Father did."

"Now Helen. We've been over this," said Al. "That'll not happen if we keep the Microbots a secret amongst ourselves. You must realise it was Arnold Klien's greed for power which caused the trouble. Not MIKE and MIN."

Iona could hardly wait to retrieve her cap from the garage and take Bren's around to him. However, she waited patiently until her Mother and Father finished talking. They were full of plans for the new baby, Al's computer repair business and of course Helen's job at the Juice Factory. This was to end when she was six months into the pregnancy or earlier if she became unwell.

Somehow, there appeared at first to Iona there were plans for everyone else except herself. But, why complain. She had MIKE back and then overheard them talk about setting up a University fund for her. Impulsively the girl grabbed both parents and kissed them excitedly.

"Go on with you," said a pleased Helen. "Here's the key to the cupboard. Hurry off now and take Bren his cap."

Bren was equally happy about the reunion with the Microbots. Of course neither MIKE or MIN showed any feelings about the week's separation. In fact, they carried on as if there'd been no gap since their last meeting with the two humans.

**<Do Helen Barclay and Joyce Larsen still want me to help them with the housework?>**

"No. I don't think they need your assistance anymore with their housework, MIKE," said Iona carefully.

Iona and Bren could hardly restrain themselves from laughing out loud over MIKE's serious enquiry. The Microbot truly didn't realise he'd caused any harm. Suddenly they became aware of the truth and exchanged looks. Of course, he'd unintentionally destroyed the carpet. Even at less than light speed, materials made from many things would burn when passed through the Earth's atmosphere as a result of a heat build-up due to friction. It could've been worse. Helen Barclay was right, someone might've been hurt. They agreed silently to take care nothing similar happened like that again.

"How're your crystals?" Iona asked the Microbots.

The fact they'd been out of sunlight for seven days would've reduced the power available to them.

**<We both need at least three hour's boost, Iona.>**

It was agreed the caps would be placed in positions in both homes to take the advantage of long exposure to sunlight.

"We really must check the Controllers' supplies for spare crystals as soon as possible," Iona remembered.

"Now, about this cautionary effect MIKE," said Bren. "I've noticed the first ones affected, that's Deidre and her friends are not quite so nervous in Iona's company as they used to be."

**<May I've a minute to investigate this, Bren?>**

Bren was surprised by MIKE's question and failed to make a reply. He glanced to where Iona sat by his computer and shrugged.

"I don't know what he means either," she said. "I suppose we must allow him to do what he wants to do."

"Perhaps MIN knows what he's up to."

"Ask her then."

There was no answer.

"They've both gone!" Bren exclaimed in amazement. "What's going on?"

"Don't ask me. Maybe we've offended them when they were locked away?" Iona wondered.

**<I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Bren.>**

"Er! That's okay MIKE. But, where's MIN?"

***<I've returned too, Bren. I was assisting MIKE with his research on your query about the cautionary effect on humans.>***

**<Yes. I paid a visit to Arnold Klien and Ivor Vincent.>**

"They're still in prison I hope?" Iona cried.

**<Indeed. In a Los Angeles jail. MIN went to an English jail just out of London to check on Leo Vincent.>**

For a moment Iona and Bren were staggered by the Microbots' explanation of their absence. A visit to both London and Los Angeles and return within a couple of minutes. Then they realised, at the speed of light this was just a simple journey for them. But, why had they wanted to see their old foe Arnold Klien and his henchmen, the Vincent brothers? After all it was they who set out to capture them.

"Well then MIKE. Are you going to tell us about this sudden urge to visit those crooks? I'm sure it was not a friendly visit."

**<Of course not Bren. It was in search of a more full answer to your question regarding the cautionary effect on humans. The first subjects, the girl Deidre and her three friends were young and very**

impressionable. I wanted to see if those adults we probed experienced similar reactions like the young ones. I'm afraid I had to wake both Arnold and Ivor to test them. >

"Did you actually talk to them? Of course not, they haven't got headsets."

**<True Iona. I had to startle them as they had to be wide awake when I probed their minds. Although, I think Arnold Klien was suspicious something was happening to him out of the ordinary. However, he's still a very angry and greedy man. >**

"I hope he stays in prison. It could be dangerous for all of us if he was to get free," said Iona shivering at the prospect.

"Oh. I don't think there's much he could do if he did get out," said Bren. "He's not got the money to spend looking for us now."

**<I don't know about that, Bren because he still has lots of wealth hidden in secret bank accounts. The authorities didn't get everything he had. >**

"Let's forget about that and hope it never happens. Now, what did you find out?" Iona asked.

**<Klien is certainly not wary of anyone or anything, while Ivor is still as surly and bad tempered as ever. >**

***<Leo Vincent showed no remorse or wariness either. His trip you forced him to make to Tahiti plus the loss of the funds promised him by Klien for capturing your Mother have only made him a great deal angrier.>***

"Oh well. They've not improved in their manner by being put in jail, have they. But, what do you reckon about my question MIKE?"

**<I was wrong about it being permanent, Bren. The wariness effect will disappear as one gets older in the case of the young humans. It has little impact on grown-ups. They go back to what they were before just as soon as our probes are released from their minds. >**

Iona and Bren sighed with relief. They now knew none of their parents suffered when placed in a coma.

"Oh dear! Does this mean I'll soon have to worry about Deidre and her pals again."

"Not if you make friends with them, Iona," Bren suggested.

"Humph!"

"You could try. They're not really so bad once you get to know them a bit."

"Okay. One day if I have to, I'll make peace with them. But, Bren Larsen, you're really too trusting of people you know."

Her friend just grinned at her and changed the subject.

"What about ANDY's UFO sightings then?"

Iona suddenly experienced a chill throughout her body. Bren's words reminded her of the unsolved problem discovered in ANDY the Android's memory bank. With the Microbots locked away, there was no opportunity to follow up on any new UFO reports. Had there been any?

"I don't think there's been much reported about UFOs lately."

"I'll put in the Britannica Encyclopaedia's CD."

She watched while Bren used the encyclopaedia to find information on the history of UFOs. Continuing to remain quiet as her friend summarised the main facts.

"Hmm! The first reported sighting of a UFO was made by an American pilot in 1947. He saw nine strange craft flying in a wedge- shape formation over the Cascade Mountains in Washington State. They were small, crescent shaped discs he said. After being accused of seeing things he suggested it was all true and very clear as it was daylight. Since then other pilots reported cigar shaped craft, globe and triangular shaped UFOs. Some flew in unbelievable ways, even seeming to play tag with their aircraft, especially military ones. Others were seen to hover easily, yet were not equipped with helicopter blades."

"It was as if a dam burst then," he continued. "Hundreds of sightings from the air and from the ground were made from all over the United States, as well as from the United Kingdom, Hungary, Japan and Malaysia. In 1949 one observer recorded UFOs flying at over 5000 kph, when the fastest air speed was only about 1000 kph."

"Gee, Iona, you were right. There've been hundreds and hundreds of sightings. Look here," he pointed to the data scrolled on the screen. "There are 446 sightings listed in England alone between 1959 and 1966. In 1967 there were another 362. Quite a few 20 years ago also. Heh! Several from South Australia too you know. We might've had lots and lots of visitors from outer space."

"But, still no evidence they actually exist. That's apart from what we've found out about the A-niners and the Controllers. No one else can provide any proof and we can't tell anyone either or we might end up with trouble again. However, I think a lot of people got carried away. Surely many of those sightings are just imaginary."

"Maybe. But, the M9 and A9 visits were years and years earlier than 1947," said Bren thoughtfully. "There's no reports of UFOs being seen before then."

"MIN. Did your ship look anything like any of those ones?"

**<According to the Controllers' records, Iona nothing at all. Our spacecraft from M9 was cube shaped. It would never have been sighted from anyone as it travelled invisibly by time-shift.>**

"But what about when they flew over the Continents looking for somewhere to land?"

**<Not even then Bren. The Controllers pilot would still have used time-shift in the Lander. There was no other method of propulsion on M9 craft. The Earth's surface would've been viewed on the inboard monitors. Visual data was supplied from the sensors built on the outer skin.>**

"From what Dad told us about the huge distances between here and the Milky Way time travel would be the fastest way to go," Iona said.

**<Even with time-shift travel can still be tiresome, according to one of the Controller's notes.>**

"But, I can't believe I'm talking seriously about any of this."

**<Your scientist, Albert Einstein said in 1905 when discussing his theory on Relativity time travel was possible Iona.>**

"Yeah, but that was years ago. Nothing's been proved."

**<We learned of a human experiment in 1971, Bren which showed some of Einstein's theories could be right.>**

"What was that, MIN?"

**<Two aircraft flew in opposite directions very fast. One east in the rotation direction of the Earth and the other west, against the rotation. At the end of the flights, their clocks differed in time to a ground based one. All three atomic clocks, the most accurate available, were set the same at the beginning of the experiment. Time was gained or lost. Due to the direction of motion, the height flown and an effect of the pull of gravity.>**

"Gee. So it could be true."

"Bren, please. Let's leave it. This stuff's getting too heavy. Somehow, MIKE, MIN and ANDY come to Earth. If they say it was by time travel. Fine. What do we know about things like that?"

"You're right Iona."

**<Indeed Iona. The Android 's memory banks did say the A9 craft used time-shift travel too.>**

**<There was Andy's shuttle. It could've been seen and classed a UFO as it investigated ways to carry water to A9 .>**

"No. I don't think so MIKE. ANDY said it was used mainly over the Pacific and the Antarctic There's no record of any UFO sightings reported from that area 20 years ago in here," said Bren tapping the PC. thoughtfully. "Mind you, everything mightn't be in here."

"In that case, do you think its worthwhile investigating these reports, Bren? After all, MIKE and MIN have already said they knew nothing about such things and if any of us know something about alien visitors they should. So, why do anything about it yet?"

"What're you getting at Iona?"

She didn't reply. Instead, smiled knowingly at Bren and addressed a question directly to MIKE.

"How did you find ANDY?"

**<I used my heat sensor searching for something which was foreign to Earth on and around Minamitori Island. It's power pack still gave off warmth, despite the Android was in a standby mode only and hidden in a bird's burrow.>**

"Well. What does that prove?"

"Wait Bren. Now, both of you, MIKE and MIN. Did you discover any similar things while you travelled all over the World gathering data for CRAIG?"

Both Microbots agreed they had not.

"What if there'd been living aliens instead of androids, like your Controllers or the A-niners somewhere else on Earth?"

Once again the Microbots agreed they would've given off different heat sources. This was because, they stressed each creature was a product of what they had eaten. Birds, reptiles, insects and even plants were easily identified from each other as were humans. Aliens had a diet far different from anything found on Earth and would be detected very easily.

"So. We should not waste time and their crystal powers until we've something definite to look for," declared Iona. "MIKE and MIN can monitor the news and go and take a look if something comes up. Just like Dad suggested in the first place. Okay you guys?"

**<Yes Iona. But, we really are not guys, just ... >**

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. I meant Microbots."

"Caught you out again, eh!" Bren laughed. "But, I must admit, you're pretty smart. Er! That's for a girl."

Laughing as he wheeled away quickly from Iona's attempt to slap him.

## SIX.

Iona sat watching the late news with her parents that Saturday night. She'd quietly given her Father their ideas earlier, regarding ANDY's UFO sightings, while Helen was out of the lounge fetching coffee. He agreed with them completely. There was nothing to be done until something positive came up which could then be investigated. They also decided, although the Android might've been right after all and things could get pretty scary, worrying was not going to help.

Information discovered in the Controllers' LOG, a diary translated into English by MIN, suggested other Worlds were seeking to take the Earth's natural treasures. This was indeed frightening stuff. However, their success in capturing the Android and the information A9 might not be capable of continuing the attempt to steal water gave them hope. Perhaps these other places were just as badly off, even worse. They were millions of years older than Earth. There was also the fact, the data was thousands of years old when they learned of it.

When Helen took the empty cups to the kitchen, Iona continued her report about the Microbots.

"We have to make certain MIKE and MIN get plenty of sunshine Dad. Their crystals are low in power, but not in need of replacement just yet. I've left my cap on the window ledge over there where it'll get the early morning sun. I told Mum. I don't think she approves still. However, there's nothing else I can do for now."

"We'll have to find a better place, Iona. Especially now it's winter. Of course we could fit up CRAIG's old solar panel in the study. You know the one it used in the cave to get power. Leave it with me and I'll work it out with your Mother."

She also told him about the search for crystals in the M9 supply box with MIN's help.

"We couldn't find any others than those first ones in the time left this afternoon. I hope MIN's right and there are some more."

"Yes, so do I. And there's something else needed," Al mused. "An inventory of what's in there could be very helpful. We'd be able to go straight to what's required, without fiddling with all those shelves."

The conversation ended quickly as Helen returned. Neither Iona nor Al wanted to upset her by discussing the Microbots openly.

"Those fires in Florida look awesome Dad. I thought only Australia had such terrible bushfires."

"I don't know about here so much, Iona, but we had them bad in California. And if it wasn't fires or a threat of earthquakes, there were mud slides to worry about too."

"Nature can be pretty destructive at times," said Helen. "Indeed along with all the pretty things like flowers, trees and wonderful scenery, there's a dark side too."

They all watched as an ABS reporter listed the facts 200000 hectares were burnt while nearly 400 buildings had been destroyed. All this despite firefighters from dozens of nearby States fighting the raging inferno. With thousands having to flee their houses without many possessions and no end in sight, the Barclays felt upset for the victims.

"I'm afraid there's little we can do to help," said Helen. "It might be we'll be experiencing the same conditions here in Australia within a few months."

"Didn't we send some firefighting planes to Indonesia, Mum when they had those huge fires?"

"I believe we did. But, the Americans have not asked for our help. So there's nothing to be done unless they do."

"I wonder why we've all these fires. How do they start?"

"Several things set things alight, Iona," said her Father. "Lightening strikes from electrical storms when the timber's dry or careless camp fires. Sometimes the fires get away when farmers carry out burning to clear scrub and forest for more agricultural land. Worst of all is an arsonist. A sick person who deliberately lights fires."

"What a creep."

"A criminal really," said Al.

"So, it's not always Nature's fault then."

"No. Unfortunately human beings can be just as destructive," said Helen. "It's after ten thirty, you two. I'm off to bed. Coming Al?"

They both kissed Iona goodnight, suggesting she not stay up too much longer and left the lounge. Iona thought about the bushfires for a long time. Suddenly, she turned off the TV and light, then slipped quickly over to retrieve her cap. When she arrived in her bedroom, it was not to sleep. She'd decided on a mission. An attempt was made to contact Bren. It was unsuccessful. MIKE was asked to go and give him the signal she wanted to talk.

"Hey! I was asleep," Bren complained.

"There's no time for that now," she spoke urgently. "I know how we can get the Microbots to help people."

"Couldn't it've waited until the morning?"

"No. There's thousands already in trouble and perhaps a great lot of others soon to be joining them."

"What're you talking about, Iona?"

"Florida!"

"Oh! The bushfires. The Microbots can't help put them out. You know they can't have anything to do with water."

"But, they could build fire breaks. I just remembered that's what they do here when the fires are out of control."

"Crikey. You're right. With their powers they'd soon grab a bulldozer and grade out a break super quick."

"Someone will have to supervise them, Bren. They'll have no real idea of what's expected."

"You mean, a hologram?"

"Sure. It'll have to be tonight and done without the authorities knowing who did it. We must not let anyone find out about them you know or we might've another Arnold Klien to deal with."

"That's a hard one."

Bren was quiet for a moment. Iona knew she'd set him thinking. He was good at solving problems once someone got him interested. She frequently understood what needed to be done, but the method to achieve a solution often eluded her.

"Can I be the hologram?"

"Sure. You know I'd much rather stay at home."

This was not exactly the truth, but because of his disability Bren got a real kick out of feeling free when in a hologram form.

"Right. I'll get MIN to take me to Florida first. We'll pick a place close to the fire's front after we've found a bulldozer with the biggest blade we can find. Then I'll get MIKE to create an earthquake."

"An earthquake!"

"Well, not exactly. But, it'll be early in the morning there and you did remind me we've got to keep this a secret. While MIN controls my view of the scene, MIKE can wield a large bulldozer blade at almost light speed across the fire's path which'll both build a break and bury the flames too. This'll sound like an earthquake to anyone."

"Brilliant. You see, building sand castles and playing with mud when you were little has prepared you for this moment. Eh?"

"Funny, funny."

Iona could tell by his tone of voice however, he was pleased with himself for thinking of the plan.

They checked on the routine necessary for setting off on a hologram adventure. First MIKE saw to it their parents slept soundly. If the one acting as the hologram was woken

suddenly, there could be dreadful results for their well being. They might've memory loss or even worse. A human could become completely senseless, the Microbots warned.

MIN was helped by Iona, to get the in-aser from the Controllers' supply box, still in the garage. This was an alien instrument, shaped like a torch, which turned a solid object into a holographic form. It was then used to project the hologram in the selected place.

As a precaution, a new crystal was fitted for MIKE. He was the Microbot requiring the most power when building the fire break. Iona could do this quickly now. With the special goggles, the microscopic robot could be seen clearly. It only took a split second to implant the replacement gem using the hypodermic instrument supplied for the task. The worn one was to be placed in the sun tomorrow, to hopefully restore its energy. A mental note was made to get the Microbots to gather all the used crystals and put them under the solar panel when it was in position in the study. She became mindful there might not be many spares left in the supplies.

An observer could watch the action on the PC monitor. Iona was glad it was in the bare study. Until the new carpet and curtains were in, the place was cold, but warmer than the garage. She borrowed the quilt from her bed to supply some warmth. It might be a long night.

During the underwater search for the Android's marker drones, they took turns at either observing or being a hologram. MIKE kept a watch on the hologram's physical body. Tonight Iona would be alone. They'd have to risk there was no interference to Bren. Both Microbots were required in Florida.

There was an improvement on their first efforts when hunting for the A-niners. Now they were able to speak to each other during the whole event. MIN had discovered a newer hologram in-aser in the supplies. This came with a communication linking device.

Iona had no idea when the team set off from Bren's bedroom. It was 11 pm. when she sat down before the PC, waiting to get some idea of what it was like in Florida. They'd learned a lot about conducting such events since their first attempts a few weeks ago.

But, the first scenes revealed things were not going well according to plan.

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