



MICROBOTS 4

BY EL DEE.

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ONE.

"Oh no! What's this thing doing back here?"

Her Mother's loud cry awoke Iona Barclay from a deep sleep. A glance at the radio clock showed it was 8:15am Saturday. She'd slept in. What was wrong with Mum? Grabbing her dressing gown and slippers, she almost barged into her Father in the hall.

"What's wrong with Mum?"

"I don't know, Iona. We slept in too. She went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee."

An upset Helen Barclay stood by the open back door. On the porch stood a small, naked boy. He looked frozen stiff. However, his face displayed a broad smile while he made no attempt to move.

"Well, I'll be blown!" Al Barclay exclaimed.

"It's ANDY," cried a surprised Iona.

The slender thirteen year old brushed the unruly, brown hair off her dark eyes, which beamed with excitement. She rushed over and bent down before the boy. He appeared to be about six years old.

"Hi ANDY. Did they send you back with a message?"

Suddenly she jerked upright, clasped her right ear in surprise and hurried off. Returning wearing a battered baseball cap bearing the logo of the Sydney King's basketball team.

"What'd you go and get that thing for, Iona?"

"MIKE wanted to talk to me, Mum."

MIKE was a Microscopic robot from a distant, alien World, named a Microbot by Iona's Father. It'd been abandoned on Earth years ago, when its space craft was destroyed.

"I suppose it had something to do with bringing this boy back here."

"I don't know Mum, until I talk to him."

Iona spoke into the tiny microphone dangling from a concealed headset under the cap's brim. This was how she communicated with MIKE. Her Father and best friend, Bren Larsen possessed similar devices which they used when wanting to speak to him or his twin, MIN.

"Well, what'd it say?"

"Hang on please, Mum I'll ask MIKE to talk to all of us."

MIKE's squeaky, tinny voice appeared to come from the peak of Iona's cap. It was here the Microbot could usually be found. Normally he spoke through the headset earphones, but would project his voice if asked.

<I didn't bring this object here. We no longer have the ability with which to time-shift. By the way Iona, ANDY has to be switched on, Do you remember where?>

Despite appearances, this was not a young Earth boy. It was an Android from another Planet. It had been named ANDY by Bren.

"Yes. I think so. Ah! Here's the control panel in the small of its back. Now which one's the right switch."

She flipped the first two and nothing happened until she turned down the third toggle. For a moment she wondered just what those other switches did. But, forgot about this when the Android stretched slowly, and spoke in a clipped, adult voice. The odd, English accent sounded strange coming from the small body.

~Greetings young Master. I didn't wish to frighten the Mistress of the house. But, I couldn't explain myself until I was activated. I bring you tidings from the Aquanovemites.~

Aquanovemites lived in Aquanovem, a World somewhere in the Milky Way, where the Microbots came from. Because the name was such a mouthful, Bren renamed it A9.

"Gee, that's great ANDY. But, we call them A-niners now. It's much easier for us humans to say."

When the Android was first caught trying to steal the Earth's fresh water for the A-niners, Iona was established as its Master on Earth. It was copied from a human model, captured and released, the humans were assured 500 years ago. This explained its appearance and manner of speech. However, the girl considered ANDY to be rather snobbish, despite its willingness to obey her.

"Well. What's the message?"

"Wait a minute Iona. We're all eager to hear what they've got to say. But, don't you think it's a bit cold to talk out here?" Al asked. "Let's all go inside."

"That thing's not coming in until it gets some clothes on, Al."

"Of course. Get the Android one of your old t-shirts, Iona. Now, be fair, Helen. I'm sure if you spent a little time buying some suitable boy's clothes, ANDY would appreciate that and then perhaps it could stay. We might think of this as practice for the future," he said with a smile.

Helen, who was pregnant, blushed. Then agreed with her husband when Iona covered the figure with a bright yellow shirt. Though it was at least three years old and shrunk in

size, it was still too big. It trailed on the floor when the Android tried to walk. But, it was Helen who hitched the bottom clear, in a Motherly manner before the creature tripped over.

"We should let Bren hear the message too, Iona."

"Oh gee Dad! Do we have to wait for him to get round here. He could listen in on his headset."

"Iona. He's been involved along with all of us and ... "

The rest of the sentence was left unspoken. Everyone knew what was meant. The fourteen year old Bren, unfortunately was confined to a wheelchair. His legs were paralysed in a car accident.

"Mum'll get us breakfast while you give him a ring. Try the phone for a change, we can afford it. Anyway, he might still be asleep and not have his headset handy."

With the Microbots' help, communications between the Barclays and Bren was more convenient through the alien headsets or via computers. This was only one of the many wonderful things MIKE and MIN were capable of doing. They were far superior to any robot on Earth.

An hour later, only three humans were ready in the Barclay's study to hear ANDY's message. The Mothers preferred shopping to spending time with an alien.

"Now, let's think of ANDY as a 'he'. Calling the Android 'it' becomes very confusing considering his appearance," Al suggested.

"Okay Dad. Well, ANDY. C'mon, spill the beans," said Iona.

~Oh deary me Master. There are no beans that I can see. I'm not sure what they are exactly and I certainly couldn't spill them either.~

The Microbots, despite having program applications which gave them the ability to understand English, found trouble with slang speech. This gave the younger humans great amusement at times. It seemed ANDY suffered similarly.

Iona remembered they were trying to stop MIKE and MIN adopting human bad habits. An example of good manners and behaviour they hoped would train the Microbots to act sensibly. After all, they were machines and may cause considerable trouble, although unintentionally, if not given exact instructions. The Android would have to be treated the same way.

"Sorry for being rude, ANDY," she said politely. "Would you please give us the message."

~Certainly Master. The Ruling A-niner wishes to advise you the plan to make suitable soil progresses well.

They expect to be established on their new Planet within a thousand years of your time.~

"How can they be so sure," said Bren in surprise. "It's only been two weeks since we sent you back there."

~That was not a problem for them to solve. They simply time-shifted into the future to see what was going to happen, Master Bren.~

There was a long silence from the humans. Dealing with these visitors from outer space, meant there were often times when strange things needed to be accepted without explanation. Neither AI nor the teenagers considered the possibility of time travel as a way to investigate the future. However, there was a feeling of relief. This news saved the Earth's soil. It was rapidly being depleted, washed into rivers or being built over without the A-niners taking more. They had suggested a plan to help the A-niners make their own. ANDY was used to carry the message to the Milky Way.

A9, a polluted Waterworld, was quickly freezing as its twin suns cooled. The few remaining A-niners were trying to migrate to A6. This was a Planet similar to what Earth was like billions of years ago. Because of the volcanic nature it was not suitable for living things yet.

"So, the plan's working Mr Barclay. But, a THOUSAND YEARS! It sound almost unbelievable."

"Yes Bren. However, this is barely the tiniest blink in the scheme of Planet time. We should be grateful everything's going well for the A-niners, otherwise they'd become extinct. Something we've got to consider. Soil conservation is important, especially with the increase in the World's population. We need to produce more food and for that we need a continuous supply of good soils."

"We should tell everybody about what happened with the A-niners, Dad. That'd make people take notice, surely."

"I'd like to Iona. But who could we trust?"

The Barclays and Larsens kept the Microbots presence a secret on Earth. They were frightened unscrupulous people would take control of the robots for their own purposes. Arnold Klien, now languishing in a Los Angeles jail, tried to take over the aliens. He nearly destroyed the Barclay family in the attempt while imprisoning AI illegally for years. He was left in poor physical condition and still struggled to regain his health.

"How're they breaking up the rock so quickly, Dad? You told us the sun and stuff takes years to crumble it."

"Can you answer that ANDY?"

~Yes indeed Sir. Again it was a simple matter of using laser power. The work team of androids soon reduced the base rock to very small particles around volcanic springs.~

"Hey! Digging up the garden with lasers sounds pretty neat."

"Now Bren," Iona warned. "Let him get on with it before we're side-tracked. Tell us about the worm, ANDY."

Part of the plan sent to A6 included a 3 metre sulphide worm taken from the ocean's depths by MIKE in an underwater submarine. This creature existed without oxygen, getting its food from volcanic gases.

~Once the scientists changed a gene or two so it could live in the Planet's gravity, it was cloned into a billion of similar worms. It's adapting very successfully. Combining with the bacteria brought from your Earth to make an excellent quality of soil.~

"You were right, Dad. The A-niners found a way to help themselves after all."

~But Master. It was your idea which set the whole scheme going. The Ruler asked me to tell you they'd always be grateful. If they're able to be of assistance in the future, you've only to ask.~

"Gee. That's terrific. But, it's a long way to send for help especially when we've no phone link with A6," said Bren.

~I was given a time-shift communication drone, dear Sir.~

"Al Dear. May we interrupt you for a second," asked Helen.

"We've something to try on ANDY," Joyce added.

Both Mothers came into the study wearing huge smiles and carrying what seemed an awful lot of boy's clothes.

"Helen, Joyce! ANDY's not going to need more than one change of clothes. It's not as if he'll be playing outside like a normal boy."

"Ah! But, if he's living here I want to be able to have a change for him every day. You know I can't stand dirty clothes," said Helen firmly.

ANDY's expression never changed while he was subjected to the women's attentions. Iona murmured quietly to Bren, she reckoned his processor would be churning out huffy complaints within his frame. A printed message appeared on their headset visors. These

were actually tiny screens on which MIN communicated with them. She couldn't speak, only write.

<Are we to be given the opportunity to wear something different, Bren?>

TWO.

"What'd you think about MIN the other day?"

"It sounded a lot like jealousy, Bren."

They were waiting outside the Science Lab for Mr Whyte to appear. He recruited the two to assist in preparing equipment for the next lesson. They were his brightest students.

"But, she can't expect our Mums to get her clothes like ANDY's. She's so tiny, none could be made that small."

"Careful, Bren. She might be listening."

They wore their baseball caps with the concealed headsets as usual, keeping a cautious eye for others who might hear what was said.

"I don't care. This is getting ridiculous, you know."

"What?"

"Not being able to have a private conversation."

"I don't know what can be done about it. Unless of course we stop wearing our headsets."

"Yeah. But we might miss out on something important."

"Perhaps we could. Things have quietened down now the A-niners have sorted themselves out. After first trying to steal our fresh water and next the soil, I think we've had enough excitement for a while."

"Yes. I suppose so. Although, I thought the Microbots seemed to be acting a bit better until this happened," Bren sighed. "Gee, MIN's behaving like all girls. Crazy about clothes."

MIN had been given a girl's name and character while MIKE was considered a boy.

"Thanks a lot."

"Sorry Iona. I didn't mean you ... "

"You did say all girls."

"Well. You're different."

"Now, I don't know how to take that, Bren Larsen. Either I'm not a female or maybe you're just a wee bit grumpy this morning."

Just then, the plump, friendly Science Teacher hurried along the corridor, calling an apology for keeping them waiting. Bren, sighed with relief as he wheeled his chair cautiously in behind Iona. Mr Whyte's appearance probably helped him get out of the bother his comment about girls was leading.

<We're not wanting any human clothes, Bren. I felt you should be warned if it was suggested, the materials would ignite when in contact with us.>

Bren glanced over to Iona and saw she'd seen the message. Mr Whyte was busy in the storeroom.

"See. MIN's not like all us girls. She's sensible. I think you'd better apologise, Bren Larsen," Iona whispered.

"Sorry, MIN. You too Iona."

Perhaps he hoped this was the end of the matter. Fortunately it was, but the event which unfolded was drastic.

<Bren. We've no sense of smell like you humans.>

"I hadn't realised that, MIKE."

He spoke very quietly, not wanting the Teacher to overhear him talking. Trying to explain to Mr Whyte or others who overheard him, would surely cause them to think he was mad. Also Iona and he wished to avoid anyone learning about the Microbots' existence.

"Was there something you wished to know? It's a bit difficult to talk right now as we're putting out the gear for the lesson. I'd rather Mr Whyte doesn't overhear us."

<Of course. I'll tell you later when we're alone, Bren.>

The bell sounded for the beginning of the school day. Within minutes the lab was full of their chattering classmates. A few comments were passed to the Lab assistants about the quality of the equipment laid out on the bench tops. Most were generally in fun. One group of girls however, complained loudly. One addressed the Teacher loudly.

"Mr Whyte. If Mouse ... Sorree!. If Iona's gonna be giving out the gear, she shouldn't be allowed to have the new stuff for herself every time," said Deidre Beauchamp.

Deidre was the Class leader. Well, she thought so. Only Iona appeared to challenge her on the matter. However, not because the youngest member wanted the position herself, but objected to the way she was treated by the older girl. One main complaint was being called Mouse.

"Yeah, Mr Whyte. Our Bunsen burner's all yucky," cried Bella.

"And the beakers are cracked too," Lurline complained.

Iona stopped and waited. Margot, the other member of Deidre's special lot of friends would surely have something to say.

"I've got gooey gunk over my clean uniform from this stuff."

"Where Margot? Oh. That's only a wee spot," said the friendly Science Teacher. "Come on girls. There's nothing wrong with your equipment. Anyway, Iona's not got anything new herself. Everything here's not only old, but out of date. We've just got to do the best we can

with what the school gives us. Go and put your things against the corridor wall. You know they shouldn't be on the benches. And I wish you'd take off those baseball caps, Iona an' Bren. It makes it hard to see who I'm talking to. Now, come along. Settle down. Your instructions are on the chalkboard."

A hushed moment in the lab was rare. Usually there was a babble of discussion, the clatter of equipment or the sound of Mr Whyte's rather loud voice. This morning the class kept quiet, straining to figure out what it was they were expected to do. Their Science Teacher often teased them with problems.

A sudden squeal startled everyone.

The silence was shattered. Voices were raised in surprise and some annoyance.

"Heck, Bella. Watcha' go doin' that for?"

"Yeah! I nearly hadda' heart attack."

It took a red-faced Mr Whyte several minutes to quieten the class. Many boys took the opportunity to tease the girls. They pretended to hunt for spiders and other creepy crawlies amidst the apparatus.

"What's this all about, Bella?"

"Oh gee! Mr Whyte, that cap there spoke to me."

The shaken girl was closest to the personal belongings.

"It what! Come on now. You're imagining it."

"But, I heard a voice saying Bella, come here! It did, Mr Whyte. True. It spoke in a funny, tinny kinda' voice too."

Bella reached down and gingerly picked up the cap.

"It was this one. Look. It's got a walkman inside it, Mr Whyte."

Several voices informed the teacher who owned the headgear.

"Iona. You know the school policy about walkmen. You're supposed to leave them in your lockers. Mind you this is the strangest set I've seen. Never mind. Here, go and put it in there straight away."

While an embarrassed Iona left the lab with cap in hand, the class was called back to order. In the corridor, she placed it on her head and spoke sharply.

"What're you trying to do to me,MIKE?"

<Sorry Iona. It was the only way I could get your attention.>

Usually the Microbots signalled they wished to communicate by tickling either Iona or Bren's ears if the headsets were not worn.

<I was unable to move from the visor. That girl sprayed a substance over the cap, which is drying fast. She chose yours first and

may have been reaching over to do Bren's. I think it's some sort of glue. >

"Do you mean you're going to be stuck there?"

<Probably until you get home when Al will have to get me off. But, there is no time for talk. We've an emergency. >

'An emergency. Oh know! The A-niners, they're back stealing soil," she cried in alarm.

<No Iona. They're not here. It's about what I wanted to discuss with Bren. The part about smell. >

"How could this be an emergency, MIKE?"

<It's about my lack of ability to smell things which is the emergency. >

"I don't get it."

The lab door opened and Mr Whyte called for Iona to hurry. She hurried to obey, shoving the cap into her locker and hurriedly returning to the room to be greeted by Bren.

"What's that all about?"

"I don't know."

"Come along everyone," Mr Whyte cried. "Times wasting. Quiet Iona. Now, get your attention back onto those instructions."

For the second time quiet descended on the lab.

"Oh crikey! Look at that thing."

This startled cry was followed by several other outbursts from students near the corridor wall. Mr Whyte didn't look so friendly as his lesson was interrupted again. However, even he was shocked by what everyone could now see. A baseball cap floating in mid air.

"MIN!" Bren snapped. "What's she doing?"

"Who's Min?" asked a nearby boy.

Bren didn't bother to answer, but reached up and grabbed the wavering headgear. Quickly he placed it on his head.

"Larsen!" Mr Whyte was angry. "This prank's got to stop now. We've an experiment to complete before the end of the period."

"He's got a walkman in his cap too, Mr Whyte."

This was too much for the rattled Teacher and he strode across the room, reaching to snatch the cap from Bren's head, who ducked and wheeled himself away.

"We've got to get out of here now, Sir," Bren declared from a safe distance.

"WHAT!"

"I said we have to leave the lab. We're in danger. The place's about to blow up!"

"I don't know what's got into you, Bren. You're usually very sensible," said a puzzled Mr Whyte. " Now please ... "

The class became very vocal, interrupting him. Some students, suggested they leave immediately. Others laughed and poked fun at the white-faced boy in the wheelchair. Everyone was amazed however, Bren Larsen, though handicapped was considered the smartest, coolest one in the class.

"It's because he hangs around with Mouse. She's corrupted him."

Iona heard Deidre's spiteful words above the babble of voices.

"Please Mr Whyte," Bren pleaded. "Let's get outside first. Then you can have a go at me. Anyway, we've got to tell the other classes too."

The Teacher looked undecided for a moment.

"I don't know what this is all about. The only stuff that could explode here is the gas. No one's turned their burners on yet and if it was, we'd smell it. It has an artificial odour so it can be detected if it's accidentally turned on without being lit."

"It's leaking under the floor and has been all night."

"Oh. Go on Bren Larsen. How'd you know that?"

"Hey Sir. There's nothing coming from my burner," yelled a boy.

"Mine's empty too," cried another.

Everyone turned on their Bunsen burners.

"Where's the gas gone?"

Mr Whyte rushed from one bench to the next, listening for the telltale hiss, but there was none. His face paled with concern. Before he made any decision, his students panicked.

"Bren's right. The gas must be under the floor, it's not here."

They were not waiting around for more discussion and poured out of the room. Their shouts in the corridor spread chaos in the other classrooms. Teachers struggled to gain some order. Fire drill was eventually organised and the Fire Brigade advised.

Fifteen minutes later a fireman, dressed in preventive gear confirmed there was indeed a large pocket of gas beneath the lab floor.

THREE.

"So Bren was a hero today."

"Well, it was MIN who told him about the gas, Dad. But, he was pretty cool under fire. Old Stinks ... "

"Stinks?"

"Mr Whyte. I dunno'. Everyone calls him that. Probably because he's the Science Teacher," Iona shrugged. "Anyway, he was pretty mad by then, ready to lash out at anyone," she giggled.

"Surely it wasn't funny."

"No. But, seeing their faces when MIN floated the cap over to Bren was a scream," Iona struggled to control herself. "Of course I'd no idea what was going on then. My headset was in my locker. That's when MIKE told me about the glue and tried to explain about his inability to smell things. I'd no chance then to listen, 'cos Stinks ... er! Mr Whyte ordered me back into the room."

"That was unfortunate. However, it all worked out eventually," said Al sympathetically. "Gee, those girls seem to have it in for you, but of course spraying glue on your cap, they'd no knowledge that a Microbot was camped there."

"They'd freak out finding that out, Dad."

"Probably. But this stuff's ruined the material."

"What about MIKE?" she said in alarm.

"Oh. He's pretty tough. This solvent's unstuck him. I couldn't use water as it might've harmed him. But, he'll need a new crystal, because the cleaning fluid destroyed it."

The crystal supplied the power for the Microbots and other alien tools, including the headsets. It was only found on M9, MIKE's World and unavailable on Earth. It's most remarkable ability was that a microscopic gem could provide so much energy and was renewable directly from the sun rays. However, it couldn't store large amounts and required constant boosts of sunshine. Unfortunately, it didn't last for ever. There was one weakness and a major one and it was the fact, water dissolved it quickly. Even water vapour in the air.

Iona went to the study wall unit and from a medium size box took out a strange pair of binocular-goggles. Without this viewer humans were unable to see a Microbot. The smaller crystal was picked up in a little hypodermic instrument and injected into the centre of MIKE's tiny, cell-like form. It could be excused at first thinking he was a living cell and not a microscopic machine. However, when the power gem was in place, it burst into a brilliant flash of light, similar to a lightning strike. The girl learned to close her eyes before this occurred. When it settled in place, the robot could be seen to shimmer with electric energy, not life.

"You'll need a new cap, Iona."

"Perhaps I'll let Mum choose a new one for me Dad. She never liked that one. Too boyish she reckoned."

"What did your classmates say about the flying cap? I bet there was quite a lot said about it after the excitement was over."

"Gee Dad. Bren soon had them agreeing with him, that it was an effect brought on because of the gas," she began to giggle again.

"It was just natural gas wasn't it?"

"Yeah. But, he told them the fumes made us all dopey and we thought we saw the cap floating in the air. He's pretty smart, for a boy that is," she said. "Anyway. What's to be done with ANDY?"

"I'm not sure, Iona. Your Mum dresses him in a different outfit every morning. Even switches him on and off."

"She'll have to be warned his power pack might get used up."

"I doubt it. Don't you remember. ANDY told us he operated for a 100 years, before MIKE caught him."

Nothing was decided about the Android and Iona left her Father studying the list of things available in the box from where she got the goggles. This was actually the supplies brought from M9 by the Microbots' original builders. They were called Controllers. Four travelled to Earth, but couldn't survive here.

An enormous amount of alien equipment was listed on the inventory when the humans finally found it. Things were held in time-space, taking up little room in the actual container. When selected and placed in the Earth's atmosphere the object resumed its true shape and size. There was one difficulty in getting objects from the many shelves found inside. Each shelf needed to be rotated by a human hand until the one required was at the top. The Microbots had no limbs, artificial or real.

The labels were in M9 script. Although MIN, who could read and write all languages, had translated the inventory into English, AI wished for the same to be done on the shelves. He hoped the humans could then find things for themselves. This was his task. However, his doctor only permitted him to work for an hour or two morning and afternoon until he returned to good health. The job was going to take a very long time. Until then, he wouldn't know what was fully available. More importantly, whether or not there were things which might benefit people. Therefore, this box of wonderful inventions must be kept secret. In the wrong hands, a great lot of damage might be done to humankind.

"That's strange. On the news last night, they said five African lions disappeared from a zoo in Los Angeles. Tonight a Bengal tiger was taken from San Francisco. But, there

was no sign of a break-in or how they carried it off. Just like the first one. Could it be the same gang?"

"Hmm," said Iona politely.

They were watching the late TV headlines. Iona was not really listening to her Mother, but became a little curious when Helen wondered aloud, why anyone would steal such big, dangerous creatures. The reporter suggested a circus might be involved.

"The modern circus has difficulty in getting animals for their acts," he said seriously. "Many people object to using animals in circuses anyway. Overseas, in the countries where exotic creatures can be still found, the Governments have discovered keeping them in National Parks as tourist attractions to be very profitable. Therefore, very few are for sale. It's suggested, stealing animals from zoos might be a way dishonest managers are rebuilding their acts. The circus industry strongly denies this would ever happen."

"Gee. That's what some people try to do here, Mum. you know, steal parrots, lizards and other Australian animals to sell overseas."

"Yes Dear. But, there's a lot of difference between a lion and a parrot. I can't see Mr Smuggler carrying even a baby lion on board a plane."

"Don't they squeeze the birds into round containers in suitcases? You know like in a honeycomb."

"They've done that at times. But, the one I read about the other day, had a dozen galahs in special pockets sewn in the inside of a suit jacket when he was caught."

"Well at least they saved some."

"Unfortunately most were dead. They got suffocated."

"Oh! The poor things."

"What's up Iona?"

Al returned to the lounge bearing a tray with coffee. Iona explained quickly what they were talking about.

"They usually dope the creatures. To keep them quiet while they're travelling, I suppose." he said.

"That must be awful. They'd get horribly sick. Remember how Mum felt after Ivor Vincent fed her those drugs?"

Helen Barclay was kidnapped by Arnold Klien's henchmen. The terrible Vincent brothers. She was kept drugged while flown from Sydney to Los Angeles. MIKE and Iona traced her whereabouts and eventually managed to gain not only her freedom, but Al's. However, the experience still haunted the Barclays.

"I'm afraid many of the animals die."

"I hope MIKE and MIN are not listening, Dad. They get real cross about things like that happening to living creatures."

"Is that right, Al?"

"Yes Helen, their Controllers programmed them very carefully. They'd never intentionally hurt any living thing. And this is one of the reasons we've got to protect them. If they got into the wrong hands, some smart scientist might be able to rewrite their programs. Then they'd be very, very dangerous."

"It's a real shame there's so many bad people."

"I don't think there's really that many, Iona. It only takes one rotten apple to make a whole case smell."

"Why'd they do it, Dad?"

"Money. I believe the going rate for a sulphur-crested cockatoo's \$2250. Galahs around \$3200, rainbow lorikeets \$725 and a black, python snake as much as \$4000. If the bird's learnt to sit on someone's hand they can get another \$800 for it. Now, if the parrot talks, its yet more profit. A \$1000 they reckon," said Al.

"I'd like to catch all those smugglers and, and ... "

"So would we, Iona. But, that's a job. for the Police."

"I'm afraid not many are caught. Not enough Inspectors. Smugglers can fly from secret airstrips up North. Selling our wildlife is becoming widespread. They're thinking of lifting the ban, making it legal."

"Would the authorities do that, Al."

"What else can they do Helen if it can't be stopped."

"There must be something we can do," said Iona."

"Now Iona. Don't get yourself all upset. You'll not get to sleep worrying about it. Because, it's really time for bed now," said Helen.

FOUR.

"Hi Bren."

"Oh no, Iona. Don't you ever sleep?"

Iona was still upset about the activities of animal smugglers and hadn't gone to sleep, just as Helen warned. She tossed and turned for an hour, before deciding what to do. Eventually, MIKE was sent to the Larsen's to signal Bren she wished to talk.

"I've got a great idea ... "

"Why is it you get these flashes of genius in the middle of the night," he interrupted.

"Go on. It's only eleven."

"Nearer midnight."

"Weeeeell. If you don't want to hear about it."

"I'm awake now. So spill the beans, Master."

"Now now. No need to get grumpy."

"Iona. I ... I ... I really don't know about you sometimes. But, come on. I'm all ears. Things've been pretty quiet these past couple of weeks."

First of all Iona explained the conversation she'd had with her parents concerning the smuggling of Australian wildlife.

"Boy. You've some great discussions with your Dad. What started this one?"

Iona could tell by the sound of his voice through the earphones he was envious. Bren missed his Father badly. He was killed in the crash which paralysed his legs. She'd overheard Joyce Larsen telling her Mother there was really nothing physically wrong with her son's legs now they were healed. The doctors reckoned it was in his mind. The shock of his Dad's death blocking off the part of his brain that sent messages to walk.

"Oh. Mum saw this bit on TV the other night, about lions stolen from a zoo. Tonight they said a tiger was smuggled out of another one."

She went on to tell him about the huge amount of money the smugglers got for selling rare parrots overseas. Then, how someone suggested the Government should increase their efforts to stamp out the trade. A spokesman for the Minister of Customs said they were trying to do just that.

"We can't do anything about it, Iona. Leave it to Customs."

"I know that. But, if they don't hurry, it means these bad guys are still getting away with it. That's not fair. They've caused so many animals to suffer already and killed lots too."

"It's bad I know. But, what?"

"This might not happen for a long time. It could be months before the smugglers are stopped stealing the wildlife."

"I suppose you're getting somewhere with this, Iona. But, it's taking a long time and I'm getting SLEEPY."

"Bren I've talked this over with MIKE and MIN ... "

"I knew it!" Bren exclaimed.

"Are you getting mad?"

"No. Glad. You've come up with another hologram adventure, haven't you?"

The Microbots through their advanced science could create a hologram picture of anything and transport it anywhere. They even made holographic images of Iona and Bren. When in this state the teenagers could speak to each other, direct advice to the robots while observing things quite safely and then remember what happened. In the past they'd been diving off the Great Barrier reef and other oceans. Fighting bush fires in the USA and investigating strange holes in Africa and Sicily. Bren had a brief visit into space above the Earth. All this travelling at the speed of light.

"You felt it was an invasion of privacy when the Microbots listened in on our conversations."

"I got it wrong, Iona. They're curious, want to learn and not nosy. At least they don't go telling others about what we say."

"True. There've been lots of times they could've got us into heaps of trouble telling Dad what we did."

"Yeah. They're loyal and only answer when questioned, usually."

They both remembered the odd time when either MIKE or MIN offered advice freely. However, their ideas proved valuable. As they would on this occasion when Iona explained the plan to Bren.

"They heard what Dad said about animals getting drugged and killed. I said they'd get very cross about it."

"Well. I don't know that's exactly what they felt, being machines you know."

"BREN! This is not the time to be going into practical things like that. You know what I mean."

"Sure. I'll be quiet."

"That'll be hard," Iona giggled. "Anyway, although they might not've sounded cross, they're keen to do something about these smugglers."

"What?"

"Send out the Watchers."

These were actually Microprobes. Tiny alien machines which were in reality nothing, but simple sensors. Capable of flight at near light speed. However, they were limited to doing only one task at time. Unfortunately, their crystals, when exhausted couldn't be replaced. They were expendable. Once there were 30 available. Watcher-1 to Watcher-7 were used in the hunt for the soil thieves.

"They'll be able to detect the warm bodies of any animals hidden in suit cases, other luggage and cargo as well as in someone's clothes. Mind you, we'll have to watch every Australian airport where they fly out to other countries."

"What about ships?"

"I don't reckon they'd use them, Bren."

"You're right. Too slow. They'd lose all the animals and not make any money."

"MIKE's keen to take charge of them again," said Iona.

The Watchers couldn't communicate with humans. A Microbot was needed to relay their information and program them in the first place. However, either Iona or Bren will have to become holograms and examine each suspect. The person or persons identified by the Watchers might be quite innocent of smuggling rare animals. There could be other reasons why they gave off heat sources apart from their own.

"Okay. When'll we do it? It's too late tonight. And remember, we've got a Math's test on Wednesday and another on Thursday. Gee, old Skinny Simmonds sure is pushing her lot lately."

"How about the weekend? I'm supposed to be staying over at your place, Bren. Remember, Mum's taking Dad to that place in the Blue Mountains for some special treatment."

"Diet and exercise therapy, Iona."

"Right. That too. But, what about it?"

"I'll have to do all the hologram trips."

"No way. Dad's released me from my promise not to go."

"Okay. But, we've got to do something about Mum. I suppose it won't hurt sending her to sleep early."

There was one danger for the human in holographic form. Their actual body was really asleep while the hologram image was in use. If they were woken suddenly, awful things may happen to their brains, the Microbots warned. In the past, until Al Barclay found out about the trips, MIKE placed their parents in a protective coma. To stop them unintentionally interfering. This was a benefit for the adults, because they seemed to wake fully refreshed. Of course, neither Mother knew anything about such activities. Iona and Bren guessed they might be in more trouble than just frazzled heads if the women found out.

"Yes. It'll be mean getting MIKE to send her to sleep. But, we have to do it, Bren. It's for the animal's sake."

"Well, for those ones we might be lucky enough to save. However, we're going use a lot of crystals to power up the Watchers I reckon there's at least five main airports."

"Dad said smugglers probably fly off airstrips in the Northern Territories to Papua New Guinea and from North Queensland too."

"That'll make it harder to find them. But, let's get the Microbots to find all these little airstrips and work out a plan for some Watchers to visit them quite often. Gee, even at a hundredth of light speed they'll be able to cover those places properly for days."

"What if we aren't able to get there just then to check?"

"We'll work something out if and when it happens, Iona."

"You don't mind I woke you then?"

"Not really. This is a good job for MIKE and MIN. We're helping someone. Well, another living being anyway. But, now I'm really tired, Iona. If you've any more bright ideas, please leave them until the morning."

It was 10:30 Friday evening before either Iona or Bren had the heart to wish Joyce Larsen good night and pretend to go to bed. She seemed happy enjoying their company. After a great pizza meal with all the trimmings, followed by a Vienna chocolate icecream cake, she produced a video movie. One of the latest neither had seen. So, operation *Smuggler Snatch*, as they called the venture was placed on hold while they sat back and enjoyed themselves too. It didn't really matter, because a dozen Watchers were in action since noon. So far there were no reports of anything suspicious happening.

"Is she asleep, Bren?"

"Like a baby. No need to whisper."

"Good. 'Cos MIKE's got someone in Brisbane. Now, who's going first. MIN's got the in-aser in your computer room."

This was the instrument which changed the subject into a hologram and then, like a torch, projected it. The area where the image was in place could be viewed on a PC.

"I'll go. You went to A6 remember. Get MIN to come into my bedroom. By the way, your room's got a lumpy bed. It's my old one."

"Thanks. I thought you might be a gentleman and give me the best one though," said Iona.

"No chance. Not after the way you wake me up at all hours. However, there's a cushion on the chair by the PC."

Iona pretended to punch Bren on the shoulder as he hurried the wheelchair to his room. She knew how important the hologram trip was to him. It made him feel free of his disability.

The first contact proved to be an embarrassment. A girl trying to smuggle something on the late flight to New Zealand all right. But, it was her pet kitten. She was in tears. when it was discovered beneath her sweater. The shocked parents agreed to pay for its delivery. A special flight cage was found for it, while a Veterinary Officer cleared the little creature through quarantine.

The Customs Inspector looked puzzled. He'd no explanation, how he actually learned the animal was there. Just muttered to his fellow agents, about something whispering in his ear. They grinned in disbelief.

Bren's image beside the action appeared lifelike on the PC monitor, Iona noticed. Real, as long as no one tried to touch it. Then they'd have a surprise. MIN was aware of the dangers and ever ready to move him away from the passenger entry. This was easy in a crowded airport.

However, the Watchers became confused. Alarms were relayed frequently to the Larsen household. Both Iona and Bren became confused themselves rushing in turn, from holographic observation at one airport to the next, all over Australia. Eventually they got MIKE to sort it out. Heat sources from babies carried by parents were eliminated from the Microprobes' instructions.

Two more false alarms happened together before flights out ended for the night. Travelling at the speed of light however, got Iona's hologram in position exceptionally fast.

In Sydney a passenger tried to take a live lobster home. Because the creature was not big and wrapped in tinfoil, he nearly got away with it, except for Watcher-9's detection. The man told the surprised Inspector it was a present for his wife in Tokyo. That they're extremely expensive in Japan was probably the real reason. The other in Melbourne proved more serious. A suffering bird. But, not rare. A lady had a doped budgie in her purse. Iona asked MIN to expose her by arranging for the article to be dropped in front of a sleepy Inspector. Both the passenger and Officer were surprised, when the bag snapped open mysteriously to reveal the poor creature. It was dead. Iona felt no pity as the frightened woman was led off for questioning.

Saturday and Sunday, they concealed their hologram trips from Mrs Larsen with some luck. There were several false calls. However, they caught no wildlife smugglers. This was a great disappointment.

FIVE.

"Gee. I'm exhausted, Bren."

"Me too."

"And after all that, we never caught one smuggler."

"Well, at least the Watchers are still covering the airports and airstrips. MIN reckons they've enough power for another week at least."

It was Monday lunch break, back at school after the frustrating weekend trying to catch wildlife smugglers. The friends could hardly stop yawning as they ate their sandwiches. Both agreed being a hologram was quite tough work, despite their bodies were asleep and not moving. The effort appeared to wear out their brains. Mrs Larsen meanwhile was refreshed and cheerful everyday.

"I hope MIKE's got the Watchers properly programmed now. We'd so many false alarms I was beginning to go nuts."

"It was your idea in the first place."

"You agreed we should give it go, Bren."

"Yeah. I'm a sucker for punishment. But, if they find one while we're in class, we won't know. Our headsets will be in the lockers."

They wore them now while outside. Last week, despite Bren's heroism, the rule about walkmen in the classrooms was being enforced by the Teachers. Iona didn't want her new baseball cap near Bella, Deidre or the others again, anyway. This one was also supplied by Bren's Uncle Col when he heard about the wilful damage. However, it was one of last year's Sydney King's promotions. She didn't mind. The red beret her Mother bought, although quite stylish for winter wear was unsuitable for the headset. Helen showed a little disappointment at her Daughter's rejection of the gift, but understood why.

<We've a contact at Cairns Airport, Iona. Are you free?>

Iona appeared startled. Not with the sudden message, but at MIKE's expectation she would become a hologram right now.

"Go on Iona. It's your turn. MIKE's been keeping count."

She looked around. They were well apart from the other students. It mightn't be dangerous. Bren was there to stop any interference. If anyone noticed her sprawled out in the weak sunshine, they'd probably ignore the sight. A few others dozed here and there on the grass. At first she felt embarrassed, forced into accepting the challenge when Bren offered to go in her place.

Cairns outward passenger terminal thronged with tourists. Most were overseas visitors carrying souvenir koalas and other Australian gifts. To one side stood three young men.

They looked uncomfortable waiting for their flight. Perhaps this was not true. But, Iona thought so. She knew there were suspicious heat sources coming from them. Watcher-14 detected more than a dozen separate pulses from each man. No babies in sight and they didn't appear to be kitten lovers. The long coats were out of place in this tropical climate too. They were surely carrying contraband wildlife. Of what kind she'd yet to find out.

The immediate problem was how to investigate the contacts. Then get an Inspectors' attention? No one had been called to pass through Customs yet. Iona knew there was not a lot of time available. Her own sleeping body might attract attention itself back at school. Also, in this emergency situation she was unable to talk with Bren. He'd no PC to watch the proceedings. She was on her own. Well, not completely. Both Microbots were here. MIN directing the in-aser image and MIKE to help.

A security guard walked slowly past her suspects. He took no interest in either them or the young girl leaning against the wall nearby. Wouldn't he be shocked, she giggled to herself if he happened to get too close and saw through her image. Perhaps if there'd been time, she might've teased him. Then reminded herself why she was here. *Smuggler Snatch*. But, perhaps she might be able to grab the guard's attention another way, which would be useful in exposing the men. That's if they truly were smuggling wildlife.

It was no use asking MIKE for suggestions. The Microbots were not programmed to give solutions. What could be done? The coats. Surely the men were feeling some discomfort. If just one was to take off his garment, the security man might spot what was hidden underneath.

"Could you get one of those men to take his coat off, MIKE? You know, make him feel extra hot perhaps."

>I could place them all in a coma, Iona.>

Iona sighed. This was MIKE's usual answer to such things.

"I don't want you to zap them, MIKE. If there's truly birds or other animals beneath their clothes, they might fall and squash them. Please, just make the tallest one feel very hot so he'll have to take it off."

Their voices couldn't be heard by anyone not on the hologram communication linkup.

The sudden, wriggling antics of the tall man were quite funny, actually. People looked on in amusement. Not so his companions.

"Whatcha' doin' ya' jerk," snarled the shortest of the trio. "Put your coat back on, Carl. Oh blimey! The security fellow's comin' over."

"I think we'd better clear out, Bert" said the third man.

Bert and his mate hurried for the exit with their hand luggage. The one named Carl struggled along behind, his coat half on and off.

Iona began to panic herself. Things were going wrong. She should try and shout for attention. However, it was impossible for a hologram image to speak aloud. But, MIKE could project his voice. The girl quickly told the Microbot what to say.

<Stop them, they're thieves Those three men have stolen my bags. >

No one seemed to notice the voice coming from the girl was squeaky and tinny. People began to take up the call. The first guard grabbed his radio and called for help. The men had no chance and were quickly surrounded by other security men at the terminal entrance. Bert protested fiercely, declaring the luggage they carried was their own.

"Get that girl who made the complaint," a senior guard said.

Iona knew she couldn't explain anything to the first security man who hurried back towards her hologram. She could easily disappear. But, then the men would escape too. Hurriedly, she got MIKE to make Carl strip off his long-sleeved shirt. This drew attention away from herself.

"Hey! You can't take you clothes off here!" cried one captor.

"I think there's something fishy about this," said another. "He's fair bulging around the waist beneath that shirt."

Security men and excited spectators were puzzled by what happened next. The tallest man's companions tried to pull his shirt on, while he tried to get it off. It was the ripped fabric which decided the contest. A belt of cardboard tubes around the exposed waist came into view and the men stopped struggling.

"Aha! What've we got here," cried an Inspector hurrying over.

He reached over and eased a brilliantly, coloured form from one container. It flopped helplessly in the Officer's hand.

"This is a parrot. I bet he's a wildlife smuggler. We'd better search his mates too," he said to the other security men.

Three puzzled, angry men were escorted away. Heading for a very long prison sentence, Iona hoped. Now, she'd better return to school.

"Well?" Bren asked when her eyes snapped open.

"We nabbed three smugglers. I don't know how many birds they'd got hidden away or whether they're all right."

Iona explained to Bren what happened. He was still chuckling when they went back into school. Both felt proud achieving success at last. A trio of smugglers no longer free to

worry the native animals. But, while they were isolated in school from the Watchers during the rest of the afternoon, events became very public. Things which the happy teenagers didn't find out about until the main evening TV bulletin.

"Any day around Australia there could be 400 aircraft in the air," said the news Reader. "Probably more than a third in the sky covering the vast distances of Northern Australia. This afternoon, suddenly without warning, not a plane or helicopter could take off. Those few still airborne were forced down on the nearest strips. So far there're no reports of casualties. What's worrying is the fact military aircraft are grounded too."

"What's going on?" Helen asked.

"There appears to be no reason why these machines aren't flying," the Reader continued seriously. "In most cases maintenance checks found no engine failure or damage. All instruments fail to read There've been suggestions this has been caused by a solar blitz. Others talk of UFO interference. They say something which can effect every aircraft in the whole of Northern Australia, can't be simply explained as electrical or weather interference. Aviation experts are divided on the issue."

Al shook his head in puzzlement at Helen's question.

Iona felt a sudden urge to talk to MIKE. Were the Watchers involved? Every airstrip, large or small in Northern Australia was being watched every few minutes for smugglers. Their team were very efficient and this sounded like they'd found something. It mightn't just be contraband animals though. Why ground all aircraft? The Microbots had been told neither she nor Bren could be available during school hours. Perhaps there should've been some clear instructions given as a guide to what to do in case other suspects were found. They'd slipped up. Leaving the Robots to make the decisions probably caused this chaos. Why had neither MIKE or MIN been in touch?

"Where're you going Iona?"

"I er! I've got to give Bren a call, Dad."

"It wouldn't be about this would it? I mean, that bit caught on amateur video showing those three men in Cairns earlier in the news. There seemed no reason why one of them suddenly decided to strip off and got captured with rare birds concealed around his waist. This mess grounding planes everywhere in Northern Australia so suddenly, sounds a bit like Microbot interference to me. Especially after all the questions about smugglers and airstrips, you kept asking me about last week."

Iona sat back in her chair. Dad might not be physically healthy, but his brain was smart. She couldn't lie. However, Mum was about to learn of the hologram adventures. Which was going to be worse? Dad's criticism of their *Smuggler Snatch* plan or her Mother's dismay and anger.

Carefully Iona spelt out what they did while her parents were at the Health Clinic. Cautiously avoiding mention of holograms. Hoping to escape Mum's indignation. She knew there'd be trouble for Bren too from his Mother, when the holographic trips were exposed. Somehow she knew her efforts were hopeless, the topic would be brought up eventually.

"Surely by now Iona, you'd know enough about things to give the Microbots proper directions. What've they done to the planes?"

"I dunno' Dad. I hoped Bren might know. But, we forgot. Sorry."

"It sounds to me 'sorry' might not be enough for all the trouble you've caused, Iona. Do you realise how much this is going to cost everyone, not to mention the investigations that'll be conducted."

"What I don't understand, Al is how they expected to control everything at the airports from the Larsen's place," said Helen.

Iona sensed the axe was about to fall. Dad saved her. For now.

"You know Helen. I think this is something Joyce should hear. Perhaps we can invite Bren and his Mother around after school tomorrow for a meal. Now it's important to get the aircraft back into the air."

Iona followed her Father into the study where he called MIKE.

<I was waiting for Iona and Bren to inform me they were available to examine the suspect, Al.>

MIKE was not embarrassed or worried he'd done anything wrong when Al asked him what happened. However, Father and Daughter were shocked to learn all this happened because of just a single suspect.

<I reprogrammed Watcher-15 to immobilise the craft until the man's cargo could be examined. Iona and Bren told me to be careful about this. They didn't want any more mistaken exposures.>

"Other mistakes! Oh no."

"They weren't really bad ones Dad."

Iona quickly explained about the babies, the kitten, lobster and the budgie. Her Father at least didn't appear so grim, after hearing her out. Then turned his attention back to MIKE.

"Why every plane though?"

<Every plane. Oops! Sorry Al. The Microprobes are single minded. It keeps doing what its programmed to do until all its power is gone.>

"At light speed too. No wonder everything was grounded suddenly. Thankfully, no one was hurt. Well, we'd better fix this."

MIKE was told to program a spare Watcher to restore the energy to all engines and instruments. The suspected smuggler would escape they knew. This couldn't be avoided.

SIX.

After a very quiet meal the next evening, the Barclays retired to the lounge with their two guests. Iona and Bren knew they were in for a grilling about the hologram adventures. They'd tried to prepare themselves at school. Unfortunately, neither could come up with suitable excuses. To tell the Mothers it was fun, would prove disastrous. When the women learned of the possible dangers, the friends expected fireworks. But, first Al suggested they check the news.

The aircraft began flying again last night around 8pm. Al was right though, half a dozen different investigations were underway. However, the reports were not all bad news. In fact, some was good indeed. A dozen smugglers were intercepted. One with rare wildlife in his plane, who Iona hoped was MIKE's suspect. The other machines were loaded with illegal drugs. All were caught because the police throughout the North hurried to give assistance where possible to downed pilots. It was possible other criminals managed to escape detection. But, they'd been given a fright, the TV Reader suggested.

A comment by one prominent Darwin man brought a smile to Al Barclay's face. The first time Iona noticed her Father seemed to relax since last night.

"The pair of you seem to manage to turn things around to make things almost right, don't you?"

"We do Dad?"

"Didn't you hear what that chap in Darwin said?"

Iona and Bren showed confusion. They'd not been listening too closely because of concern about what was going to happen to them.

"He suggested the whole scam was set up by the authorities to catch criminals. That's why it took place when few commercial flights were airborne. No one got hurt, only the crooks who were caught."

The teenagers looked hopefully at each other. Thinking perhaps they might escape after all. Al Barclay didn't appear too cross. However, the women soon showed their concern.

"Last night you said our Iona and Bren were involved with grounding the planes, Al. Have you changed your mind?" Helen asked.

"Oh. They're involved all right. Fortunately things didn't turn out so badly after all. But, I feel it's time both you and Joyce knew what really went on."

"Why Dad? It'll only upset Mum."

"What'll upset me, Iona?"

"Yes. What's going on, Bren? I don't understand. What exactly did you get up to in the weekend? I'm very disappointed."

"Me too Joyce. I thought Iona could be trusted," said Helen sadly. "Whatever are we going to do when the authorities discover who caused the mess with all those planes up North?"

Both Iona and Bren held their breaths. They expected trouble from their Mothers, but not this. To have their Mothers accuse them of being untrustworthy. It wasn't fair. Al Barclay appeared to be leading the prosecution's case. He of all people would surely understand what it was they tried to do with the Microbots.

However, he didn't disappoint them.

"Hold on Ladies. Don't be too hard on the kids," he spoke gently. "I thought you should be brought into the picture, because there'll come a time when I'm not able to cope. You may have to give them support and encouragement. My health's not always the best as you're aware. Please, hear me out before you apply any blame for their actions. Though, some of this may be a worry and you might feel a teensy bit cross with our children for some of the things they've had to do. And by the way, I doubt very much anyone'll ever trace yesterday's chaos back to our place."

The women showed relief at this. They politely murmured their agreement to listen quietly. To Iona and Bren however, their Mother's expressions appeared grim and unforgiving, when Al revealed everything.

He began telling them of the M9 Controllers' *Log*. How it was considered a possibility other, much older depleted Worlds sought our natural riches. The women appeared unconvinced. By the time he'd explained about ANDY's task searching for a way to steal fresh water and the A-niners theft of soil, they appeared worried. When the hologram journeys came to light, the women were horrified. Angry when told how they were placed in protective comas so not to interfere in error.

MIN demonstrated the in-aser. Not with a human subject, but on ANDY. Helen and JOYCE were amazed. They looked from the hanging, lifelike three-dimensional image swinging about the lounge to the Android's still body by the television. They showed alarm and fright when they all retired to the study. There MIKE replayed the video's of parts of the holographic searches. Now they studied their children closely, as if to see they had suffered no strange sickness or injury from experiencing such a mysterious and magical manner of travel.

There was hushed silence when Al stopped talking. The last view of the smoking volcanoes and bubbling springs of the Planet A6 still showed on the monitor screen.

"Bren. Oh Bren Dear. You looked so brave, so happy even in those pictures. You enjoyed it didn't you."

"Yes I did Mum. I'm so sorry we had to put you to sleep."

"Me too Mum," said Iona.

"Well. I must say. There were some mornings when I got up feeling wonderful, despite my pregnancy," Helen admitted unwillingly.

"You both understand the Microbots insisted the sleeper not be woken only as a measure of precaution. There's no proof being a hologram's dangerous," Al stressed.

"Yes. I think we agree. Don't we Helen. We've been judging these little machines too hastily. They've taken great care of Iona and Bren."

"Indeed. When MIN wouldn't take Iona's hologram onto that dangerous Planet, she revealed true concern for my Daughter's welfare. Although, the idea still scares me stiff," said Helen with a shudder. "But, Al. What do you expect of us?"

"Well. If ever the situation arises when there's a need for one or even both of them to become holograms, either of you can keep watch over their sleep. You see, I might not be available," he continued seriously. "You've seen what happens if the Microbots are not advised carefully. Things can be misunderstood, despite their exceptional abilities."

"And Dad. It happened while we were in class."

"Yes, Mr Barclay. The Teachers think our headsets are walkmen and they're not allowed in the rooms."

"Rightly so. But, I'm sure if you think about it, the whole thing about the grounded aircraft could've been avoided with more care."

"It could Dad?"

"Right Iona If MIKE called you in the usual manner, surely you could've been excused, grabbed your headset to discuss the problem."

Iona nodded in understanding. Then jumped. MIKE was signalling he wished a private conversation. She excused herself, leaving the others puzzled as she hurried from the study to her bedroom.

"What's up MIKE?"

<Watcher-12 has detected a suspect in Perth, Iona.>

"So. Why didn't you tell everyone?"

<By the look on Helen Barclay and Joyce Larsen's faces I thought they might not approve. They don't seem to show any willingness for you and Bren to be holograms anymore. The Watchers are still operating though and are difficult to stop until their crystals run out.>

Iona was silent for a moment. MIKE was right. Neither of their Mothers had agreed to participate. Meanwhile, the Watchers were carrying out their allotted searches. If they were

not supported, the whole effort in chasing wildlife smugglers would halt. Then there was the waste of crystals used to power the plan, not to mention the Microprobes. Ten more of the tiny machines would be lost by Sunday or Monday.

"What does Watcher-11 say about this suspect, MIKE?"

"It's not a person, Iona. It's cargo. Two large boxes. The men are about to load them. on the aircraft for Japan."

Two big boxes. They mustn't be allowed to get to Japan, Iona decided. She called MIN.

"Where's Iona got to," Helen wondered. "However, Al. I think we'll move back to the lounge and I'll get us some supper. It's nearly ten."

"Yes Dear."

Al moved to shut down the PC, when something caught his eye.

"What's this! Iona. You little minx."

The others hurried over to see what he was shouting about. Helen almost fainted while Joyce gasped in astonishment. Bren pushed his wheelchair to the the front, then laughed heartily.

"Minx's right Mr Barclay. It's supposed to be my turn."

There, on the screen a shimmering image of Iona was revealed near a loaded trailer, being hitched to a small tractor. Helen rushed from the study to her Daughter's bedroom. She returned almost immediately.

"Iona's sleeping so peacefully and wearing the most beautiful smile," she said in surprise. "How'd she drop off to sleep so quickly?"

No one answered her. Al grabbed his own headset from the wall unit and hurriedly contacted MIKE.

"Where is she MIKE? In Perth you say."

"Perth!" Helen shrieked. "That's miles and miles away. How'd she get there so fast?"

"Quiet please Helen," Al said firmly. "We don't want to wake her. And by the way, the speed of light get's you anywhere on Earth almost the moment you leave. Now, don't panic. This is a great opportunity for you and Joyce to watch and see what happens."

He asked Bren to move back and settled the nervous Mothers before the screen. After some adjustments, Helen wore his headset.

"Now talk to Iona. Be calm and ask her to tell us about it. We'll hear her on the PC's speaker. Only you can speak with her though, Helen."

"This is your Mother here, Iona," she spoke timidly.

"Hi Mum. Sorry about this, but *Smuggler Snatch* must go on otherwise all the Watchers efforts will've been wasted."

Bren grinned and told everyone about the code name for the operation. Explaining the idea came from shows on TV. Al chuckled softly while the ladies showed little amusement. Their attention was fixed on the screen.

"You're going to be caught," Helen worried.

"No I'm not Mum. MIN will take me out of here quickly if anyone comes too near. And remember what we told you, nothing can touch us holograms. We're indestructible."

Her image filled the whole screen for a moment. A cheeky smile covered most of her picture's face it seemed.

"Sorree you're not here, Bren. But, it was an emergency."

Iona turned back to the baggage cart as the tractor started its engine. Her instructions to MIKE came clearly to the viewers. First the motor coughed and fell silent. The driver could be heard growling as he failed to restart it. In the silence, loud bird noises could be heard. Parrots, cockatoos and rosellas squabbled and shrieked, until the two luggage handlers jumped clear. They clapped hands to their ears.

"What the blazes goin' on, you guys," the driver shouted.

"Don't know and don't care. I ain't sticking around here," cried one. "Whatever's wrong with the cargo's not our business, eh Jack?"

"We can't leave it here, this is the last load. They'll be ready to take off," the driver insisted. "It's not heavy. we can push it out."

"Not likely mate. This is too spooky for me," said Jack.

"Yeah. I'm calling the boy's in Customs," said the first handler. "They 'kin come and check it out themselves."

In a few minutes two nervous Inspectors cautiously approached the noisy cargo, wearing earmuffs The chaotic array of bird noises mysteriously ceased when the first box was forced open.

"Hey! There's no darn parrots in here."

"Nor in this one," said his companion. "But, there shouldn't be frilly lizards either. There's dozens of them all drugged I suspect. Someone's helping us out here, Fred."

He jumped down and picked up his radio and saw Iona.

"Say. What's that girl doing here. She's laughing too. Maybe she knows something about all this?"

"Who're you talking about, Billy? There's no one else here except us and those grinning handlers over there," asked a puzzled Fred.

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