



MICROBOTS 5

BY EL DEE.

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ONE.

"I'd no idea Dad had got hold of one of those old GEM robots, until I got home from school today and saw it in the study. I wonder when he arranged to collect it?"

"He was in the garage alone for sometime after we got back from our second trip to Jupiter."

"Yes. That's when he must've done it," said Iona.

Iona Barclay was speaking to her best friend, the fourteen year old Bren Larsen, through her headset, rather than by phone. This was of alien make, arranged for her by a microscopic robot named MIKE. So small he could only be seen through a microscope or special goggles. MIKE and his twin, MIN were Microbots from a distant World somewhere in the Milky Way. They were abandoned on Earth thousands of years ago when their original designers died. Both her Father and Bren had similar sets.

"What'd he want it for?" Bren asked.

"Oh. He just thought it might be a good idea to study a GEM, with MIN's help of course. Just in case others turned up here again."

The GEMs or Galactic Entertainment Machines, to give them their full name, came from the same World as the Microbots. Iona called it M9, because she didn't know what was its proper name. However, the machine's design was millions of years older than the Microbots. Where MIKE and MIN were capable of independent actions, performed at light speed and could communicate with living beings, the GEMs were simple robots. They'd been built for one purpose. That is, to maintain the entertainments on the mobile, artificial asteroids which carried them throughout the galaxy from one Planet to the next. Those living beings once living in M9, who first created this kind of travelling carnival were long since dead.

However, the GEMs, under the control of a mainframe computer called a PLANNER, kept on doing their allotted tasks regardless of time passing. No one told them to stop. They just kept on repairing or manufacturing replacement robots when needed, as well as attending to the different performers or displays in their charge. When the acts wore out or died, the PLANNERS set out to find others to take their place. It was this which brought two asteroids into the Solar System about a month ago, seeking new entertainments.

For some reason these PLANNERS decided Earth animals would be suitable entertainments for other Worlds within the Galaxy of the Milky Way. One asteroid was prepared to hold thousands of grass eating creatures hunted by predators like the Wildlife Parks in Africa. The second was to be an Arctic Park, complete with sea mammals and their predators. Most of the hunter carnivores were stolen directly from zoos. The deer of many kinds and whales. seals etc., were taken from the wild.

Iona and Bren with the help of the Microbots located the asteroids hiding behind Jupiter. The humans travelled in hologram forms arranged by MIN. This image enabled them to journey from Earth without the need for space suits or masses of life support equipment. Their physical bodies remained asleep at home.

After first deactivating the PLANNERS with help from ANDY an android, MIKE and MIN were able to reprogram the GEMs. The GEMs were then ordered to return all the animals back to Earth from where they were taken.

Travel to and from Jupiter was achieved through ANDY flying them in a time-shift craft. This was borrowed from the android's World also within the Milky Way. The journey times from Earth were therefore reduced to barely microseconds. Unfortunately, the machine had to be returned to its owners, the A-niners. Only ANDY was capable of piloting the craft back to his old Planet. Bren called this place A9. Iona and Bren doubted they'd ever see the android again.

"Mum'll miss ANDY more than I will, Bren," said Iona. "She was getting very fond of him. Forever fussing over what he'd wear each day. Regardless how helpful he became, I always felt he considered himself more important than everyone else. But, he was getting better."

"Yes. He was rather high and mighty at times. Even after we captured him planning how to steal the Earth's water. He never showed himself sorry. But, I think my Mum thought he was rather cute too and forgave him for that."

"I suppose it's a good idea of Dad's to work on one of these GEMs. He might find something which'll be of use. Because, if other Worlds or even the PLANNERS come back, we've got very little left now with which to protect ourselves."

Since discovering information in the records left by the Microbots' original designers, that decaying Worlds were trying to steal the Earth's natural resources, there'd been several frights. First the A-niners tried to take the fresh water. ANDY was their android charged with this scheme. This attempt was foiled by the teenagers with MIKE and MIN's help. Next the A-niners stole soil to make another Planet in their system liveable, which the teenagers named A6. Their own was slowly dying. By giving the Outer Spacers an alternative way of making fresh earth, the humans befriended them. This was the reason why the Aliens supplied the time-shift craft to help in the rescue of the animals.

"It'll be a little bit strange going to my Parents' wedding ceremony tomorrow."

"Gee. Mum an' I are looking forward to it. Especially as it's also a day off school. What's worrying you about it, Iona?"

"Nothing I can really explain properly, except perhaps it's all very unusual. However, this is something Dad wants to do to give himself a better chance of becoming an Australian."

Alvarez Linares her Father, an American computer engineer was the first to find the Microbots. In doing so he became in grave danger from his employer, Arnold Klien. Klien wanted to control the aliens for his own gain. To achieve this he imprisoned Alvarez illegally for many years, when he refused to hand them over after learning of Klien's evil plans. Al, as he was generally called, still suffered from poor health after the long confinement.

Iona and her Mother, Helen Linares an Australian, had to flee their Los Angeles home. In London, their surnames were changed to Barclay, which was Helen's maiden name before leaving England. Several years later, MIKE sought them out in Sydney. Together they rescued Al and Helen who'd by then, been kidnapped by Klien's men. To escape the media interest in Klien's crime in America and to hide the Microbots from possible further ill-use, Linares also came to live in Australia. He changed his name to Barclay by Deed Poll, as a further disguise.

"Go on. You love the idea of being a Bridesmaid," Bren teased.

"Don't you like being the Best Man?"

"Of course. Only nice people like your folks would ask a cripple in a wheelchair to be the Best Man at their wedding."

Bren had been hurt in a car accident which killed his Father. Both his legs were now paralysed. Iona overheard Joyce Larsen, his Mother tell Helen the doctors thought the reason the boy couldn't walk was shock, despite that his limbs were fully recovered from their injuries.

"Well, let's all enjoy ourselves then. Dad's taking us to some posh place for lunch after the ceremony at the Registry Office. But, I hope no one finds out at school where we really went. I think I'd die of embarrassment," said Iona.

"Hang on! They won't find out from me."

"I know that, Bren. I just hope no one sees us by accident."

"It's a pity MIKE an' MIN aren't going to be there. My Mum said I'm not to wear my cap. We've got to dress up. And she's had my suit dry-cleaned. Now, that's the part I'm not crazy about," Bren complained. "I bet you're not allowed to wear yours either."

The caps Bren mentioned were baseball caps. They disguised the strange headsets used to make contact with the Microbots. A few people had seen the sets and considered them to be weird looking walkmen fitted with sunvisors. MIKE usually sat on Iona's visor, while MIN rode on Bren's.

"My baseball cap wouldn't go with the new dress, Mum got me anyway. But, I told MIKE where we'd be at eleven tomorrow morning. He said they'd pop in for a look. I'm getting them to take pictures of the whole thing. So this'll be a surprise for my folks."

"A kind of wedding present, Iona."

"Well yes. Something extra to go with the bath towels I got them. Hey! Do you think we can put the Microbots' pictures onto a video? Then they'll have a permanent record. There's no photographs or any record left from their first wedding ceremony."

All the private and personal things Helen took with her to London when fleeing America were burnt. This terrible fire was caused by a suspicious gas explosion which killed both her Parents. The men responsible for this, the Vincent brothers were now behind bars, like their Boss, Arnold Klien awaiting trial. These men were acting on his orders to kidnap Helen and Iona. He wanted to threaten harm to Al's Wife and daughter as a way of forcing him to reveal the whereabouts of the Microbots and their controlling computer CRAIG.

CRAIG was short for a Crystal Alien Intelligence Gizmo. It was a super, mainframe computer. Far in advance of anything found on Earth. It was capable of classifying and storing immense amounts of data, solving problems while planning and directing events through the manipulation of online computers. A very superior kind of artificial intelligence. Even able to hold a conversation with humans, although it did so in a printed form on a computer monitor or the alien headsets like MIN.

CRAIG was not liked by Iona. But, even so she felt its loss when the computer self-destructed to stop from falling into the wrong hands. This was when it realised there was no way of returning to its home Planet when their time-shift spacecraft was destroyed. Unlike the Microbots, it was unable to trust anyone other than its original builders known as the Controllers.

Four Controllers brought CRAIG and the Microbots to Earth from M9 thousands of years ago. They hoped to study the Planet in detail and list its natural resources. Unfortunately for them, the wet atmosphere proved fatal. Water was something they had little experience of at home. They died very quickly.

After choosing to land in Nevada in the United States of America, the Controllers sent their spacecraft to the Moon for safe keeping. The abundance of water on Earth worried them. They considered the ship might be damaged beyond repair by rain. To protect themselves and their equipment they took up residence in a cave. Something which was quite normal for them as they lived underground back on M9. However, it was already too late for the mortal members of the expedition. It was here Al found the alien machines years later.

When the A-niners visited Earth to find a way of taking the fresh water back to A9, they found the M9 spacecraft deserted on the Moon. Their Leader decided to steal its supplies. During the attempt, both time-shift machines were destroyed, along with all the A-niners. ANDY was the only survivor. He made his way to Earth in the shuttle craft. Once down safely, he continued with the plan to take the water as he'd been programmed.

"I doubt the Microbots can actually transfer their pictures on to a video tape. I don't think they put things on film. But, they'll get it onto the computer's hard disk. Then, we can either print off copies like real photographs or make a short film and put that on a DVD disk," Bren suggested.

"Great. We can put the photographs in an album at least, but we'll have to save the disk until we get a DVD player."

"Mum and I'll get one. We've been wondering what to buy for a wedding present."

"Did you finish the Geography assignment?"

"Yeah. I wonder what old Smithy would say if he knew we'd already seen more of the Barrier Reef than his lectures and films showed," Bren laughed.

ANDY the android had set navigational drones beneath the seas of the Western Pacific. These were to guide the A-niners to his location. Unfortunately for him, the signals somehow got on the Internet. This was CRAIG's last discovery. Iona and Bren as holograms searched for the drones. The first was found on the Great Barrier Reef.

"All the same, his questions didn't really give us much of an opportunity to describe what we saw."

"No. He was more interested in how it was formed. He's a Geography Teacher and not interested in scenery. But, never mind. It was a lot more pleasant than the Maths."

"What! Bren Larsen upset by simple Maths. I never thought I'd hear that from you," Iona teased.

"Well, they were pretty tough this time. We'll see who gets most of the equations worked out when they marked. But for now, I'm for sleep. And PLEASE, no more wild plans for a bit. I know stopping those animal smugglers was great, but we didn't really stop the illegal trade altogether. Just put a small dent in it."

"Yeah," Iona sighed. "Okay. I promise I'll try not to think too hard about things MIKE and MIN can be used to help humans ... for tonight anyway."

TWO.

"Thanks MIKE. You and MIN made a great job of the wedding photos," said Iona. "Mum an' Dad were really thrilled with them, especially as they were in colour."

She and Bren were having lunch back at school, the day after the Barclay's wedding.

<Oh, that was no problem, Iona. We were glad to observe a human wedding. It was a very curious ceremony. When are you and Bren having one?>

Bren nearly choked on his sandwich hearing the Microbot's question. Iona's face blushed red furiously.

"Er. MIKE. We're a bit too young for that yet," Bren murmured.

Either MIKE or MIN frequently said something like this bluntly, but never with the intention to hurt anyone. Due to their programming they were very curious.

They were originally brought to Earth by the Controllers to collect data for CRAIG, as it was not mobile. However, since the computer's self-destruction, the Microbots began to operate more independently. Their built in ability to learn provided them with more skills as time went on. They developed the power to influence living creatures to do certain acts. Even to put them to sleep. This was usually beneficial for the subject, who awoke refreshed. A built in safeguard made sure neither of them would deliberately cause harm to anything animal, plant or human.

Although able to get information from the mainframe's memory banks, they were still not capable of problem solving. However, to prevent them unwittingly creating havoc, due to not fully understanding how humans did things, they required exact instructions about their tasks. Of course they always had the ability to communicate with people through the special headsets. Only MIKE could talk. MIN printed her speech, like CRAIG used to on the sunvisors fitted to the sets, which were really tiny monitor screens.

<The Controllers never had ceremonies like that. I never saw them doing anything other than work or study.>

"Didn't they play games or just sit and talk with other Controllers occasionally?" Iona asked. "What about watching movies, or er! DVDs. Didn't they at least listen to music?"

She'd recovered from her embarrassment. Realising MIKE was only being curious. However, she still couldn't look directly at Bren. He was, despite his disability the brainiest person in their class. Many of the girls considered with his fair hair and grey eyes, he

was the best-looking boy too. Some were jealous of her close friendship with him. She often wondered about this herself. Worrying he put up with her, because of the Microbots. After all, she felt herself to be nothing special. Small, of slight build and blessed, according to her Dad with elfin features beneath short, brown hair. Not tall and attractive like Deidre, the class leader or many of the other girls. Then Min offered more information about Controllers.

<There were not many Controllers left, Iona. They're very fragile creatures and have to be very careful not to contract diseases. Therefore they keep to themselves and communicate through their headsets, just like you and Bren. They seemed only interested in making or repairing things. By listening to music, do you mean those squeaks, clashes and ding dongs which are sent everywhere through the airways so most humans seem to spend all their time constantly having their hearing sensors bombarded by sound?>

"Er! Yes MIN. That's music, but it depends upon which type one listens too."

<No. The Controllers never had anything like that.>

"They must've been very lonely," said Bren. "I suppose that's why they couldn't survive here, MIN."

<The Controllers are a very ancient race, Bren. Probably the oldest in the Galaxy. They didn't spend much time in considering social activities as important. Being alone never worried them. Their task was to see other Worlds didn't suffer from the same mistakes which was destroying M9.>

"What do you mean, MIN? You never told us M9 was in trouble too, like the A-niners."

<I'm sorry Iona. Until you asked me to seek information on A9's decay, I'd not gone into CRAIG's memory so far and discovered these facts. Of course, you've not requested data about the Controllers before.>

This was true. Neither MIKE or MIN usually offered information freely. They responded best to questions. However much the Microbots sounded human, Iona realised she frequently forgot they were machines and treated them like people. Still, unlike real folks they never held grudges, were loyal, honest, and worthy to be considered friends. She was sure Bren felt the same about them too.

"What's wrong with M9, MIN?"

<The World is exhausted, Iona. Natural things like the soil, air and plants have been abused beyond replacement. Water has become rare. Much of the population have died, as did the original owners of the asteroids. The remaining Controllers exist with life support machines.>

"It must've been hard for those who brought you here."

<CRAIG's memory doesn't mention anything about how they felt about coming to Earth. The Controllers considered this Planet could be important within the Galaxy for survival, even though finding it was a long task. Of course, that was thousands of years ago. Long before your own human population explosion.>

Iona and Bren were silent for some minutes, thinking about what MIN told them. Remembering the Controllers' Log suggesting how they hoped to arrange trade with the Earth. Warning that a few Worlds considered seizing what they wanted. This was probably because they had little to trade, as in the A-niners' position. Bren shrugged and changed the topic.

"Well, it'll be holidays again on Friday," he reminded Iona. "I doubt we're going to have as many adventures like the last vacation."

"Gee, the time's gone fast this term. It seems just yesterday we were having fun fighting fires in Florida ... "

"And visiting the Milky Way," Bren interrupted.

"You'll not let me forget that, will you."

"It's not you I blame for missing out on my turn to become a hologram ... "

"What're you goin' on about, Bren Larsen?"

Iona and Bren turned around in surprise at the interruption. Deidre had sneaked up on them. Of course she was not alone. Her three special friends, Margot, Lurline and Bella were not far behind. How much of their conversation had they heard?

"Yeah. What do you mean, your turn to be a hologram," said Bella. "I thought that was just a three-dimensional picture."

"Have you got some secret invention?" Margot asked.

"Perhaps its another one of Mouse's witchy tricks," Lurline suggested unkindly.

"Hey. You know I don't like being called that."

Mouse was the nickname given to her by Deidre. when she first came to school.

"Hold on Iona," said Deidre sweetly. "Lurline forgot herself and I'm sure she'll apologise, Won't you."

"Sorry Iona," Lurline mumbled. "But, please don't put us to sleep again."

"By the way, how'd you manage to do that?" Deidre asked. "I know, you learned hypnotism or something like it."

The last time these girls called Iona, Mouse, she lost her temper. MIKE was asked to put them into a coma. Fortunately, he'd been able to undo this almost straight away when she realised her folly. However, now it seemed they'd worked out who caused them to suddenly collapse into a deep sleep. Deidre suffered this treatment twice now. The other girls had been subjected to some unfortunate mishaps in the past as well. Bella slipped into an oil spillage, Lurline got covered with greasy clothes and Margot fell off her bike into a damp, dirt patch, which made them look foolish in front of the class. All arranged by MIKE at Iona's request. She regretted putting them through these nasty experiences, but now it seemed they might be seeking some revenge.

Once MIKE thought humans he put into a coma, experienced a fear reaction. The first time for Deidre made her scared to go near or even speak to Iona for some time. However, since then he found out this only happened briefly with young people and they soon grew out of the feeling. Older folks like Arnold Klien and the Vincent brothers who he'd also influenced to protect Iona, felt no such worries.

"Whatever makes you reckon Iona's responsible?" Bren asked. "You've been pretty mean to her ever since she's been at this school. Have you ever thought she might've a Guardian Angel looking after her?"

Iona almost spoilt the effect his words had by laughing out loud. Little did the girls know how right Bren was. But, how were they going to get out of this without revealing the Microbot's? Dad would never forgive them for giving others the secret.

"Hypnotism. You're right Deidre, that's really what Iona's been learning."

Iona felt as surprised as the others at Bren's words. However, on reflection it did sound a good way of explaining what happened. Because, it was almost true, except MIKE was the hypnotist.

"Go on. You're putting us on," Deidre scoffed. "Prove it. I dare you to do something right now."

"Hey! Not on us though," Bella cried.

"There's Campbell over there. Do something on him," Margot suggested. "He'll be easy. But, we'll be looking out for any tricks mind."

Before Iona could protest, the girls called lanky Campbell to come over. He was quite a nice boy. A bit slow, but usually friendly. Les his mate ambled across with him. She didn't know what to do. Once again Bren came up with an idea. In fact, his eyes twinkled with amusement when he put it to the girls.

"Iona will get Campbell to imitate some bird calls and other animal sounds, Les too if you like."

"Can you do this for me MIKE?" Iona whispered. "I don't want to hurt the boys or make them look foolish. But, somehow we've got to get Deidre and Co off our backs."

<These girls are not sitting on your backs yet, Iona.>

"Er. Sorry MIKE. I meant to say we've got to give them a reasonable excuse about the comas and things so they'll leave us alone and forget about them. But, can you help me?"

<Of course. I'll make the boys imitate bird songs so clearly everyone will be impressed and not laugh at them. By the way, they shall not remember doing the impersonations. You didn't wish them to feel embarrassed or hurt.>

The small audience were indeed most impressed. Campbell and Les each in turn warbled, trilled and gave voice to several common bird opera stars. When the short concert was finished, each boy looked in astonishment at their reception. Neither believed what was said about their achievements.

"Can ya' put them to sleep. Iona?" Margot asked.

"No Margot. That only happens when I'm angry and I make a mistake," Iona replied mysteriously, staring straight at the foursome.

All four girls took a step back and smiled nervously, showing they were not trying to upset her. Campbell and Les looked from Deidre's group to Iona in expectation. Strange things often occurred when these girls squabbled they'd noticed. When nothing happened this time, they lost interest and wandered off.

"What about this hologram though, Bren?"

Although Deidre had been outwitted by the exhibition of Iona's supposed skill at hypnotism, she persisted with her enquiry. After all, she was the class leader and had a reputation to maintain.

"Oh that. You misunderstood, Deidre. We're going to see how a hologram's made during the holidays. I hope to be the subject. Say. Why don't you and the others come along too," he suggested. "It's all very scientifically set out. There's lectures as well as the displays. Gee, all sorts of interesting things to learn about."

The girls hurried off. Murmuring excuses how busy they were that day.

"They didn't even ask what day your display's on, yet had plenty of excuses to miss it," Iona laughed. "I don't think going to a science show's how they want to spend their holiday."

"Yeah. But, we sure had to tell a lot of fibs to get out of that one. We've got to be more careful when we're talking about the Microbots and things at school."

"They weren't all fibs. You know, we could arrange a real hologram demonstration for them."

"Oh sure. Your Dad would really like that. Deidre's the last one you'd ask to keep a secret," said Bren. "Everyone in Sydney would soon find out about MIKE and MIN."

"Hey. You're putting her down. I thought you said she wasn't so bad to get on with," Iona teased.

"Well. She does get me mad sometimes. But, there goes the bell. Thank goodness there's only three more days left. I'll race you in."

Without waiting for a reply, Bren sped off in his wheelchair, laughing as his hands flew over the wheels. Iona, was hard put to catch him. The crowd scattering before them, urged Bren on to victory.

THREE.

"A time-shift machine too!"

It was the first Monday of vacation and Bren was visiting the Barclay's at Iona's invitation. The bucket-shape of an immobile GEM had not held his attention for long. It could only perform actions with its queer tool-like fingers, when directed by one of the Microbots, while hovering on a cushion of air. It had no legs or wheels. The time-shift craft was a far more exciting object for study.

This spaceship appeared nothing like those imagined by humans. Certainly not sleek and swift in appearance as those shown in the classic films, the *Star Wars*. Nor in any way similar to the impressive craft of the *Star Trek* series. It sat in the middle of the garage floor appearing nothing more than a squat box. About the size and height of a small garden shed. The A9 ship piloted by ANDY was red in colour. while this older, M9 craft was an earthy brown. Apart from that, they both seemed similar, despite the android classing the other machine primitive in design. However, it had the capability of carrying enormous amounts of cargo.

The ancient race of Controllers had managed to invent a way of reducing objects in size and placing them in space-time. Later when things were needed, the stored item swelled to normal size when brought into real time. This was how the GEMs managed to steal thousands of zebras, wildebeest, antelope and other deer from the African Wild life Parks at once. Enormous creatures like whales were carried to the asteroids similarly.

"You didn't tell me about this, Dad."

"Sorry Iona. I hadn't meant to keep it a secret. But, as I'd not confided in your Mother, I felt it best to not say anything."

"Gee, Mr Barclay. What gave you the idea?"

"MIKE actually discovered there was going to be a problem with this craft. On its last trip returning the lions to the Los Angeles zoo, he noticed it losing power. We couldn't leave it lying around for everyone to see. That would've sparked awkward questions. So he told the GEM pilot to put it in our garage."

"Is it powered by a crystal too?"

"Yes Bren. At first I was going to put the last big crystal we'd got left into its power pack and then send it back to the asteroid, along with the other one," said Al. "I was pretty tired then and left it until the next day. That's when I got to thinking about its possible value to us. Mum was at work and you'd gone to school. So I talked it over with MIKE an' MIN."

"So that's how you got one of the GEMs too," said Iona.

"Yes. I was tinkering around with the robot when you came home. I'd still not decided what to do with the time-shift craft either."

"But, it's just what we need," Bren cried with excitement. "We've got no way of getting ANDY back without one of those time-shift communication drones. So, if anymore Outer Spacers come poaching on Earth we've got something to fight them off."

"I don't think this is actually a warship, Bren. It's more like a Noah's Ark," Iona laughed.

"That's not quite what I meant. This would give us a chance to be something like on even terms with them. Up to now we've had to rely on the Microprobes looking out for strange things happening around the World or hearing reports in the news."

"Yes, I know what you're getting at, Bren. Especially as we've not got many Watchers left."

The Microprobes or Watchers as Iona named them, were little robots even smaller than the Microbots. Tiny machines which were in reality nothing, but simple sensors. Capable of flight at light speed once programmed. However, they were only able to do one task at a time. This they continued to do over and over again, until either reprogrammed or their power ran out. Unfortunately, their crystals, when exhausted couldn't be replaced. They were expendable, not like the Microbots.

"Can you pilot this craft, MIKE?"

<No Iona. Its controls have to be manually handled. Remember, we Microbots have no limbs. MIN and I can only drive machines which are computer controlled or fitted with sensor switches like the in-aser.>

The in-aser was the M9 device which turned objects into holograms. These three-dimensional pictures could be formed from anything, alive or not. It was then used like a torch by the Microbots to transport the image to other places, while the original remained behind. MIN had refined the holographic forms of both Iona and Bren so they could speak to those connected to the same network computer. They were then able to plan actions and make decisions despite their physical bodies were asleep. Together, the young humans and Microbots formed an effective team spoiling the Outer Spacers' illegal plans.

"What about the GEM? It was the pilot of this ship, MIKE."

<As long as the GEM's crystal has power, we can program it to pilot the time-shift craft, Bren.>

"That's the problem though. We've not got many crystals left," said Al. "And, we've no idea how far the time-shift craft goes on one power gem. It's not got a fuel gauge like a car."

"Why don't we take it back to M9 for some more crystals."

"Gee, Iona. I suppose that's just where you'd like to go on this holiday."

"Sure Bren. It's my turn."

"Now listen you two. There'll be no joy-riding in this craft. It could be very dangerous."

"Why Dad? With the GEM to fly it and either MIKE or MIN to give the orders, there'd be no problem."

"The problem is you'd most likely end up lost. Its got nothing what looks like navigational equipment that I could find. Just a a lever, some buttons and a small wheel. Though, goodness me. I can't see how one can steer the thing. There's no aileron control flaps like on an aircraft or even a rudder that boats have to change direction. No, its not on and I'm not going to be the one to face your Mothers."

"As MIKE got the GEM to bring the spaceship into the garage, surely he's got some idea how it gets from one place to the other, Dad."

"I'm sorry, Iona. It was MIN who directed the GEM," said Al.

"Oh! Well MIN, can you explain how it's navigated?"

<No.>

Iona looked at her Father and Bren with puzzlement. MIN she knew was not being rude or smart. She just didn't know. If she'd any idea they would've been told. Neither Microbots ever lied. Perhaps the right question had not been asked?

"How'd the GEM get the craft from Los Angeles, USA into our garage, in Sydney, Australia, MIN?"

<It followed the instructions I gave it from the PLANNER.>

"Hey! The PLANNERS were put out of action when ANDY poured water on their crystals, MIN," said Bren.

The crystals which powered the machines from M9, including the Microbots would dissolve very quickly in water. Even water vapour in the air, shortened their energy capacity.

<Yes Bren. But, I copied their memory banks.>

"You beaut," cried Bren.

<What's a beaut, Bren?>

When the humans stopped laughing, MIN was informed the word described how clever she'd been in recording the PLANNER's data. They realised this was a normal part of the Microbots function. It was programmed to gather information. The question regarding the term 'beaut' was another example of her curiosity. However, human speech often confused both MIKE and MIN. Especially slang.

"All right MIN. So now we can navigate around the Milky Way by using the PLANNER's directions," said AI. "You just tell the GEM where to go and it presses the right buttons."

<Not exactly AI. There was only one time-coordinate in each of their memories and it was the same. There was nothing which suggested a destination in the Milky Way.>

"I don't understand. How'd you get it here?"

<A map of the Earth with local directions was shown in great detail, AI. I just fed the latitude and longitude of Sydney and the street details to the GEM's processor.>

"How is the time-coordinate different then, MIN?"

<It's in three sets, AI. The first is the galaxy, the second the system and the third the World. Once in visual contact the PLANNER acquires local details. I've no information on how that occurs. Perhaps another source supplies it on request.>

Everyone was shocked into silence. Another source supplying navigational aids. Just where could this be located on Earth?

"You've no idea where such a thing could be?"

Neither MIN or MIKE could give an answer. Then Bren suggested they go and look at the old Controllers' supplies. This container had been brought from the cave in Nevada by the Microbots and was stored in a cupboard in the Barclay's study. Fortunately they now had an inventory of the things in the box, translated into English by MIN. Hunting for items was very tedious. They were kept in time-space on shelves which needed to be rotated by hand.

In the study Iona and Bren leant over AI's shoulder while he retrieved the inventory file on the PC. They read through the long list of items. Many which meant nothing to the humans. Some they knew were now exhausted. Eventually one word gave them a clue.

"A drone. Could that be it?"

"I think so, Iona," said Bren

"What gives you that idea, Bren."

"Remember when we told you about ANDY's drones in the sea, Mr Barclay?"

"Right. They were placed to guide the A-niners to his location on Earth."

"Well, I'd bet the Controllers put out similar drones when they arrived here. But, they'd not be in water."

"How do we find them?" Iona asked.

"We'll use a Tracker."

A Microprobe could be instructed to track a source of energy. If these drones existed, they'd be easily found because their energy pulses were different from anything on Earth. All that was needed was to learn the drone's signal. The one in supplies provided the information. Iona powered Tracker-2 with a crystal and MIKE programmed it for the task. Within minutes it set off at light speed.

"What'll we do when we find them, Dad?"

"There's only one thing to be done, Iona. That's to destroy them. We don't want other PLANNERS finding their way around the World."

"How're we going to put it out of action?"

"Just like like we did the PLANNERS. Except we'll have to use the GEM to carry the water, as ANDY's gone home."

Tracker-2 soon found a drone. They were not surprised to learn it was buried near the old cave in Nevada where the Controllers made their base on Earth. MIKE took the GEM to dig the communication device up before it drenched its power source with tap-water from the bottle supplied by Iona. The reason it's crystal lasted so long they guessed was because there'd been few demands made on it for directions since being activated.

Tracker-2 was then sent searching for further drones. When no more were discovered, they all went back out to the garage. Al then thought they should retrieve the drone. MIKE was sent to bring the silenced communicating device back.

"It's a pity we had to destroy the drone's power, Dad."

"We won't need the drone's directions for Earth as MIN's got them already."

"I know that, but perhaps we could've just turned it off."

"Too late now, Iona ... "

"What's this time-craft thing doing in the garage, Al?"

They'd been so busy Helen's return from work went unnoticed. She'd come into the garage looking for them.

Iona and Bren grinned secretly at each other and quietly slipped outside, leaving Al on his own to make the explanations.

FOUR.

"Come and have a listen to this," Helen cried.

Iona and her Father were finishing the dishes when she called them to the lounge. The television news was half finished and the News reader seemed to treat this item with humour.

"... and it appears the crops have just simply been plucked from the ground. The farmer accuses the troops from a nearby Military air base of stealing the mature, rice plants and is seeking compensation. He alleges the young airmen have done this because he refuses to return their golf balls. The golf practice range is aimed right into his paddy fields and the balls are like missiles at times. His ducks have become too frightened to lay eggs he claims, while several family members have been struck severely when working with the crops."

"Yes, very amusing, Dear," said Al.

"No. You missed the first part. Apparently, it's quite a mystery how the plants were taken. All two hectares were completely stripped, with no sign of intruders. human or machines."

All three gazed at each other in silence for at least a minute while the TV advertisements filled the screen. Al used the mute to turn the sound down.

"Do you think it's started all over again, Dad."

"That's how the animal thing began," Helen said sadly. "Just a few lions taken from a zoo here and there."

"We'll have to make sure this is the work of Outer Spacers. I'll get MIKE to go and take a look," Al decided. "Can you remember where this occurred, Helen?"

While her Parents planned MIKE's trip to the island of Guam in the Pacific, the event made Iona more determined to go to M9 for crystals. She excused herself and hurried to the study. There to question MIN about the PLANNER's time-coordinate and the workings of the spaceship. MIN could add little to what she'd already said about the navigation of the craft. However, she suggested placing pictures of its interior onto the PC monitor for her to see.

"MIN. should I come out to the garage for a first hand look?"

<Perhaps not unless you want to be in a hologram form, Iona. Look what happens when I get the GEM to turn the wheel to the left.>

On the screen an enormous void opened up which appeared to be endless. Iona realised this looked similar to the inside of the Controllers' supply box, only far larger. Large enough, she remembered, to swallow thousands of deer.

<Your physical body would get lost in there, Iona. It's a very dangerous place to wander around in.>

Iona gulped and agreed. She felt less nervous when the GEM reversed the wheel and the void closed. Indeed, this was nothing like the craft she'd accidentally travelled on to A6. Meanwhile she learnt, the lever simply opened or closed the door while the array of telephone-like buttons, were for entering the navigating coordinate.

"We could still travel in it if the time-space cargo bay was not opened, couldn't we, MIN?"

<Of course.>

"That's what I'll tell Dad tomorrow. But, I'll wait until Mum's gone to work."

However, the task Wednesday morning attempting to persuade him to agree to the expedition, failed badly. He'd apparently made some agreement with Helen about the use of the time-shift craft. Also MIKE had not learnt anything about who or what took thousands of plants. There was no evidence to show whether the thief was human or alien.

"Dad. These directions MIN found must mean something. Just think. Those asteroids had been roaming about the Milky Way for millions of years. But, every so often they'd need more crystals. MIN said there were no spares to be found on either asteroid. There's only once place to get more. The time-coordinate must lead to M9. So please, at least let me go and take a look."

"Your Mum's already warned me not to let you. Even though she knows nothing about the need for crystals, she guessed you'd want to go off in the time-shift spaceship. I'd a hard enough job explaining why the thing was here in the first place."

"But, what if last night's mystery was caused by Outer Spacers after all? You'd let Bren go."

"No I wouldn't. It's too risky. So far there's no proof. And if either of you went to M9 and were not successful in getting more gems, we'd have used most of the crystals for nothing. What makes you think the Controllers will give you some anyway? They might be short themselves. No Iona. There's just far too many unanswered questions."

Iona was not the sort to sulk if she didn't get her own way. Nor the type to give up easily. There was surely a way of getting more crystals from M9. Without them, their whole effort to stop the Outer Spacers stealing natural resources would cease. Her Father was aware of this too. Somehow, he must be persuaded to realise there was little risk. She'd every faith MIKE and MIN would take care of her. The inventory on the PC gave them one solution last Monday. Perhaps it could provide another today.

Thirty minutes later after carefully studying the supply list, Iona thought she'd discovered something which might help her quest. She called MIN and they searched the supply box for the item in question. Dad was having his morning rest and she wanted to find out about the details herself first. That was, with MIN translating the writing into English from the instructions on First Aid. One section dealt with holograms.

After lunch, Iona showed her Father what she'd found out about holograms. She sat quietly while he read the translated section. Keeping silent when he read it again and again.

"I can't believe this," he said slowly. "Both MIKE an' MIN warned of complications for living beings when in a hologram form."

"But, you see Dad, the Controllars wanted to use this form themselves. They were going to travel about the World as holograms as they were becoming too feeble."

"I suppose that's why the Microbots knew so much about the process. But, this still doesn't say the treatment's for humans."

"Come on Dad. The Controllars were living creatures. They breathed air too and were more delicate than us. Look how quickly they died. Yet, they saw little trouble in being a hologram. This gear's in the supply box. MIN an' I saw it."

"A brain unscrambling device if the subject's forced to return suddenly to their body. It might work from somewhere on Earth."

"Dad. It says from anywhere. Don't forget, these Controllars travelled all around the Milky Way."

"Okay. That may solve the problem of accidents which will make sure you can return to your body. But, where's M9?"

"That's what we've got to find out, Dad," Iona pleaded.

"Hmm. I suppose if we just use one of the medium crystals and give you a spare, it might work. You know, the ones supplied for CRAIG. It no longer needs them."

"Both MIKE an' MIN will have to come too."

"Understood. I wouldn't let you go without both of them anyway. But," he looked worried. "Don't take long. I'd rather have you present when we tell your Mother. She's going to give us both a telling off you know."

"We'll have to tell Bren too. He's not going to be pleased either. But, if I'm successful. He'll get his chance to have a look."

"Iona! This is not some tourist trip. Be serious. It's a journey into the Milky Way. A place with millions of stars. Goodness knows how many inhabited Planets with who knows what kind of life on them."

"Dad. They can't hurt my hologram. And now I can get back, there's nothing to worry about."

"Oh yes there is. What if you lose the Microbots in the time-shift craft? You know, leave them behind, unable to return. What happens to our plans then?"

Iona was stunned with the thought. She'd forgotten there'd be others risking their existence along with her on this trip.

"I worry about that too, Dad. But, all our plans are useless if we run out of crystals anyway. We must take the risk. I promise to be careful and not let MIN take my image from the spacecraft until I'm sure it's safe. MIKE will study the Planet first," she said confidently.

"I don't know how I let you talk me into this Iona. You definitely take after your Mother. She's very persuasive. But, don't let me down. Please be very careful."

FIVE.

Iona couldn't believe her eyes. Usually in a holographic form she experienced little feelings. However, a sense of astonishment at what unfolded beneath her as MIN slowly flew along impressed her image nevertheless. They'd not arrived on M9 as expected. MIKE soon established this after venturing outside the time-shift craft first. This was another asteroid. Another GEM entertainment. Where in the Galaxy, they didn't know. But, the scene was from her own World, before human history she guessed. Had they travelled back in time by mistake?

<No Iona. This is still the present time. I checked that with the PLANNER.>

"It spoke to you and didn't attack!"

<Of course not. I was not threatening the GEM operation. We did arrive in a similar spacecraft too. There would be no need for the PLANNER to be worried.>

"I see. It probably thought we were just more GEMs. But, did you find anything else out, MIN?"

<This is one of the oldest asteroids. It's travelling into the centre of the Galaxy to a System they've not visited before. The journey will take them two hundred Earth years to complete.>

"Why would it do that, MIN?"

<At their last call the World was dead. So far they've discovered a dozen Planets without life or nearly exhausted and the populations near enough to extinction. Those remaining were few in number and without the means to travel to view the entertainment. Therefore they've made no profit for a long time. This is what concerns the PLANNER most as it's programmed to be rewarded for its efforts. I think that's why it's chosen to head off in an entirely different direction this time.>

"I thought those things used for their entertainment were long dead too. This asteroid must be many millions of years old."

<You're indeed correct, Iona. How did you work that out?>

MIN rarely asked questions. This was the Microbot's way of showing surprise, Iona supposed or perhaps wanting to satisfy its curiosity.

"Dinosaurs disappeared from Earth millions and millions of years ago. The scientists have no idea why they all died out so suddenly. But, by the look at what's down below thousands of them were stolen by the GEMs for one of their entertainments it seems."

<The information about Earth's dinosaurs was in CRAIG's memory bank. The word dinosaur means giant reptile I recall. I must be in need of an overhaul, forgetting all about that data.>

Iona was suddenly alarmed. Did Microbots need servicing? Dad's car did, so why not MIN and MIKE. They were machines too. However, this didn't sound like the place or the time to be thinking about that now They were light years from Earth and safety.

"We'd better return home straight away and tell them all about this," she said hastily.

The mission was not really successful. They'd not found M9. Could MIN get the Planet's coordinate from the PLANNER? It must surely know where to go and get replacement crystals. After all, the asteroid had been wandering about the Milky Way for so long, the GEMs must've needed new gems thousands of times. She put the idea to MIN.

<I've already got some more coordinate, Iona. I knew this was the real reason for our journey. MIKE needs an overhaul too. M9 is the only place where this procedure can be done.>

"Er! Are your overhauls urgent?" Iona asked worriedly.

<No. I'm good for several more days yet. MIKE thinks he can last that long as well.>

Iona was relieved to hear this news, but concerned no one had ever thought the Microbots needed maintenance. However, she must make sure there's some evidence of what's on this asteroid to show the others.

"Have you taken plenty of pictures, MIKE?"

<Yes Iona. In colour too. Just like Al and Helen's wedding.>

"Great. I don't think they'd believe me without pictures, especially Bren. So MIN, when we're all in the time-shift craft, tell the GEM to get us back home and not to spare the horses."

<We've not got any horses, Iona. I'll have another look, but I don't think there are any available on this asteroid.>

"Oops. I meant for the GEM to get us there quickly, MIN."

Within minutes, though as a hologram Iona couldn't really judge time properly, the spaceship was back in the garage in Sydney. A relieved Father welcomed her return when she awoke in her own bedroom. After checking she was all right, he refused to hear a word of their journey until the others could be present. There was one exception.

"Did you find it?"

"No. Just another asteroid. But, never mind, I think MIN's got the coordinate for M9 this time, Dad. I just want to say ... "

"Not now Iona," he interrupted. "It's a pity that was not M9, but not surprising. The PLANNERS seem to be very secretive about its location I reckon. Thank goodness you're back though. You've been away two hours and your Mother'll be home soon."

"Sorry Dad. I've got no time sense as a hologram. It didn't seem all that long though."

"I'm sorry too. I should've realised that. But, I was truly worried. Anyway, I've invited Bren and his Mother round. It's only fair they hear about it first hand."

"You reckon Mum won't be too cross if we've got company."

"Yep. Safety in numbers."

Al's idea proved correct. Helen, though looking quite angry at first, hearing of Iona's escapade. However, she kept her temper in check while Iona made a report. The news about the existence of dinosaurs made her forget about scolding her daughter.

Bren seemed fairly upset Iona had gone to the Milky Way again while Joyce Larsen sat in stunned silence. However, MIKE's pictures kept them all quiet with amazement when he projected them onto the PC.

Dozens of elephants feeding amidst scattered trees was not an uncommon sight on TV. A similar number of what Al identified as 9 metre long iguanodons was not. And when the number became hundreds, the viewers gasped with astonishment. A vast herd of thousands of 6 metre styracosaurus brought forth more gasps of wonder.

Although Iona had already seen some of the sights, she was still impressed. Quite a lot of what MIKE filmed was new to her too. As she didn't know the names of the creatures she'd seen on the asteroid, Al's information added another dimension to her adventure. However, he was unable to find terms to describe all the varieties of dinosaurs. There were some whose fossil remains had never been recorded by scientists.

"Those styracosaurus creatures look very fierce with that helmet of sharp horns, Mr Barclay."

"I believe they were only for its defence, Bren."

"They're all just munching away like a bunch of cows, except the trees around them, don't look quite right. They seem almost artificial," Joyce Larsen commented in hushed tones.

Everyone appeared overawed by the pictures on the monitor. They barely spoke and when they did it was almost in whispers as if they'd not want to disturb the giant reptiles.

"Those trees are cycads I think. They've got waxy flowers. They can still be found in tropical forests, like the Amazon," Al informed them.

The scene moved to show a broad, grassy plain with smaller dinosaurs running on two legs amongst the herd of larger animals. Occasionally either a horned styracosaurus or a slower moving bigger iguanodon lunged at the swifter creatures. The threatening moves were easily avoided by the upright reptiles.

"What are those little ones doing, Dad?"

"I don't know, Iona. But, they're called an ornithomimus. They were supposed to be omnivores."

"What's that Al?"

"Animals which feed on anything, Helen. Like us in a way. They eat both plants and meat. Scientists have suggested they stole other dinosaurs' eggs to eat."

"Eating raw eggs is not like us at all, Al. Although I'll admit there're some folk who like them."

MIKE's pictures zoomed closer to show a two-legged ornithomimus in more detail.

"Whew. They're not too small. They just look smaller alongside the other dinosaurs," Bren whispered. "Boy. I'd hate to have any of them step on my toes."

"Yes. Their fossils suggested they were over two metres long. If you look carefully there are smaller reptiles feeding by those rocks. Not all of them were big, some were quite small indeed. There's one living relative of the dinosaurs found in New Zealand which's only about thirty centimetres long. It's called a tuatara I think," said Al.

"Weren't those ornithomo' dinosaurs the ones that attacked people in the movie?"

"You mean *Jurassic Park*, Iona."

"Yes, that one, Bren."

"Well, they were pretty close to the truth," said Al. "A pity we can't let them see this. They'd feel quite pleased with their film. But, hang on. We've not seen any predators yet."

"I don't remember seeing anything attacking any of them, Dad. Everything looked so peaceful. Maybe, they didn't have any carnivores. Perhaps MIKE saw some."

When the question was put to MIKE, he didn't reply. Instead the screen went blank for a moment. Within a few seconds however, a different scene was unveiled. Towering above the strange looking trees was the head of the largest carnivore that ever lived. A tyrannosaurus.

It stood nearly six metres high, but for the present appeared quite content to stay still. When MIKE's pictures zoomed closer however, the human viewers were horrified to see why the predator seemed content. The remains of medium sized styracosaurus lay at its feet. Obviously the horned helmet was little protection from a hungry tyrannosaurus.

"The meat eaters were kept in another place, Iona. The GEMs only allowed them amongst the herbivores when there was a paying audience."

"Ooh! How horrible," said Joyce.

"What sort of aliens paid to watch those sort of things I wonder," Helen mused.

"I dunno," said Bren. "But lots of humans go to Africa to see lions feeding. It's all part of nature, Mum."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. However, this creature's truly frightening. At least some lions have been tamed. I remember years ago reading about one they named Elsa."

"Yes. I read that too, Joyce. The book was called *Born Free*," said Helen. "I don't reckon anyone could tame one of those monsters."

"Or would even want to try to make it a pet, Mum."

The scene shifted once again to show even more dinosaurs feeding in a swamp. They could've been related to the long-necked brontosaurus, Al whispered. Those twenty metre creatures lived in another age some 100 million years earlier, he thought. However, as all the data concerning the dinosaurs came from fossil remains, not all the facts were necessarily correct he reasoned. The others listened politely, but were engrossed at the sight of armour plated reptiles and then some flying creatures caught their attention.

"Now, they look like enormous bats with their leathery wings," said an awed Bren.

"They've got huge sharp looking teeth instead of beaks too," Iona agreed. "Hey! Look at that one. It was walking on top of that cliff on four legs before it jumped off and flew away. Proper birds have only got two legs."

"How can we say what's proper and what's not, Iona. Many thousands of different species of animals have existed at one time or another on Earth. Only a lot died out because they failed to survive when things changed. There've been many climate changes in the World's history. Ice ages followed by droughts and such. Those four-legged flying kind would've been just one of them," said Al.

"You know a lot about dinosaurs Dad."

"They've always fascinated me, ever since I was small, Iona."

Suddenly the screen went blank again. MIKE reported that was all the pictures he'd taken. The humans declared they'd like to see them again. But first, Helen insisted in making supper. While she was out of the study, Bren tackled Iona about her trip.

"You'll get your turn to go," she promised. "MIN got some coordinate from the PLANNER which she reckons might be M9."

"But, it'll be very dangerous won't it AI?"

He eased Joyce's fears by explaining what Iona discovered about the brain unscrambler. Bren was impressed with the machine when he saw it and told his Mother not to worry. They must travel to M9 to get more crystals he said. Helen, when she arrived with a tray bearing supper appeared relieved about future holographic adventures when learning about the Controllers' First Aid process.

"There's another very important reason why someone has to get to M9," Iona announced. "Both the Microbots need servicing."

Everyone, like Iona had been were taken by surprise at first. However, they realised this was not unexpected. All machines needed maintenance from time to time. Why not MIKE and MIN.

SIX.

MIN took Bren's hologram to the time-shift spacecraft straight after supper. MIKE transferred his pictures to the PC's hard disk before he left. The second and third showing of the dinosaurs revealed more information at each viewing. However, this really only passed the time while the expedition to M9 was away. Everyone awaited the adventurers' return anxiously. Would they bring back some crystals?

Time passed slowly. Iona's journey lasted two hours. The clock's digits seemed to dawdle each time one of them looked at the PC. Bren had only been gone for an hour and a half when MIKE revealed he was back. Joyce rushed to Iona's bedroom to check on her Son.

"Did you find M9? How many crystals did you get? What about your servicing MIKE?"

"Iona! Let poor MIKE get his breath," said Helen.

Suddenly, Helen laughed, realising what she'd said. Microbots didn't breathe. Joyce joined in the humour when she returned pushing Bren's wheelchair into the study. He didn't even raise a smile, Iona noticed.

"What's wrong, Bren?"

"We didn't get to M9, Iona," he sighed. "The coordinate were of just another asteroid."

"Oh no!" Iona exclaimed. "Did you find out anything about how to get to M9?"

"You'd better ask MIN."

<Apparently the GEM PLANNERS have no idea what I meant when requesting the coordinate for M9, Iona. They just supply the directions to the nearest asteroid.>

"Of course. M9's just the name we gave it. I hope you collected another set of coordinate MIN and they're different from what we've got already?" Iona asked hopefully.

MIN advised she'd indeed done this.

"So what do we do now? We can't stop searching. The Microbots need servicing and soon we'll be right out of crystals," said Bren.

"Did you take pictures of this asteroid, MIKE?"

<I did Al. Although, not as many as on the first one. Bren thought we should get back here quickly so as not to use up too much of the crystal power.>

"What a pity we're not able to measure how long the crystal will last in the time-shift craft," said Joyce.

"Perhaps we could look at MIKE's pictures," Helen suggested. "There just might be something in them that might help us. It's only gone nine and its holiday time."

"Not for you Helen, unless you're taking the day off," said a concerned Al.

Helen still worked at the Juice Factory in the dispatch department. She hoped to continue until her pregnancy became too uncomfortable. Neither her Husband nor Daughter agreed with this plan. But, she rather enjoyed the job and had made many friends.

"We've an easy day tomorrow in dispatch, Al. It's the day we receive deliveries of fresh oranges," she advised. "I just catch up on bookwork. So I sit at a desk."

No one had any other ideas about what to do, so they looked at the new pictures. This time there was not the feeling of wonder like when viewing the dinosaurs. However, the entertainment was still pretty spectacular. Once again it concerned an animal theme from Earth. The trees and shrubs dotting the asteroid plains were fairly familiar. The first creatures were not. As they grazed on grass and bushes they were presumed to be herbivores. There were thousands of them, although they were not large, in fact quite small. All bore short stubby horns. Al had no idea what these animals were called. he guessed they were at least mammals and not reptiles. It was the fact they were covered in hair he gave for his reasoning.

Another grassy plain however, contained a herbivore species everyone knew. But, they were so small. About the size of a medium dog. There were hundreds of them and although their size was confusing, everyone could see they were horses. This asteroid kept animals for show from a period of time early in human history.

Without asking anyone, MIKE projected pictures of other herbivore mammals. Some could've definitely been the ancestors of the deer family. Others, although grass eaters, looked like nothing else now living. What was becoming quite obvious to them now as they watched each new scene, the GEMs kept each different kind of animal separated. Eventually Bren spotted how.

"Look there, by those spotted animals," he said. "What appears to be a ditch is really a kind of fence. Just like the way they keep some animals in captivity at the Western Plains Zoo."

"You mean the one at Dubbo. I've always wanted to go and see that," Iona said.

"Yes, the animals all appear to be roaming free and you don't have to look at them through a fence."

"Even lions?"

"Yes them too, Iona."

"I think you're right, Bren," Al agreed. "Now that you've pointed this out, I can see the boundaries myself."

"Where are the lions then? Oh! Thank you MIKE," said Helen.

MIKE shifted the focus to a small gully. At first there was nothing to see other than a pool which on closer inspection was definitely an artificial one. More like a swimming pool than a natural one and with no creek feeding it. But, what suddenly reared upright from behind a stand of shrubs was definitely not manufactured.

"Goodness me, it's huge! Look at those enormous two teeth sticking out from its upper jaw," cried Helen. "They're the largest fangs I've ever seen on a lion. But, it's nothing like the ones we've got now. There's no mane and where's the rest of its family?"

As MIKE's pictures panned the valley, not another creature could be seen.

"This is one of the sabre-toothed variety of animals, Joyce," said Al quietly. "These cats were fairly solitary creatures and didn't live in groups we call a pride. I think they might've fought with each other if there were others in the area."

"By the look of them Dad they wouldn't need any mates to help catch those little grass eaters. Those teeth are like swords."

"It's those which led to their undoing, Iona. They look purposeful, but slowed the animal down on the plains. As their prey became larger and quicker, the sabre-tooths couldn't catch enough to live on. Then of course the last Ice Age really killed them off."

"This is all very interesting Mr Barclay, but I can't see anything here to help us find M9."

"Yes Bren. This asteroid's just another live animal entertainment like the Dinosaur Park and what the PLANNERS hoped to do with the other two near Jupiter."

"Our Earth creatures seem to be popular Al. This is the fourth asteroid now. I wonder how many others there are?"

"You're right, Mum. The GEMs have been coming to Earth for years it seems whenever they want another Animal Show."

"There's something else I just remembered, Iona. We found the special buildings for their PLANNER, but only that one asteroid which was like an African Wildlife park had a hanger for time-shift spaceships. We've got one of them and the other's crashed into Jupiter along with the asteroids when we deactivated the PLANNERS. So, how do all the others go and get new crystals?" Bren asked excitedly.

Al suggested MIKE review all the pictures he'd taken of asteroids, including those of the first two. He was asked to look out for any buildings or structures of any kind. Within seconds he reported each asteroid indeed had a squat box to house the PLANNER. There was however, only one with a hanger. One of those which crashed on Jupiter.

"Now we can see why the PLANNERS gave MIN the coordinate of the other asteroids. They don't know where M9 is either," said AI. "I thought they kept the place a secret."

"It must've been the job of the asteroid with the spacecraft to collect the new crystals from M9 and deliver them to the others. It would've had the coordinate," Iona suggested. "Why hasn't our time-shift ship got a record of where M9 is too?"

"Because we've got the wrong one unfortunately."

"Well, it's better than none, Dad. We've found out there's been some traffic between M9 and here over the years. How come we've not found a map in the Controllers Log?"

"A time-shift chart, Iona," Bren laughed.

"Why not. Hey! That drone we found near the cave in Nevada with the Earth's directions. Did MIN ever scan the rest of its data?"

Apparently MIN had not. Although it was now getting late, no one wanted to stop trying to solve the problem of getting to M9. Iona took the drone from the wall unit where they kept all the alien machines. She powered it with one of their precious gems, but only a very small one.

AI asked MIN to scan the device for information other than Earth's details.

<I've located seven sets of coordinates, AI. Five we know about already. The asteroids destroyed in Jupiter, the two visited by Iona and Bren and the one the last PLANNER gave me.>

"I suppose you'd not like to guess if one of them's M9, MIN?"

<What's guessing, AI?>

"Er! Estimating which would be ... no hang on, MIN. Choosing one you think could be right without any evidence."

<Hang on to what ... >

"Oh! Please excuse me, MIN," AI interrupted. "That hang on bit was a slip of the tongue ... No forget that too. MIN. I'll have to get you a book on Earth's slang language one day. However, did you understand the rest?"

<But, I've evidence, AI.>

"You do! Great. What is it?"

<Six of the coordinates contain a common element.>

"So they could be the asteroids and the seventh one's M9."

<I didn't say that, AL. That was your suggestion or was it what you called a guess? >

Everyone looked confused after reading MIN's reply on the PC screen. A short discussion on whether or not the seventh coordinate could be M9 resolved nothing. Both Iona and Bren declared only a visit would prove anything. The adults agreed reluctantly. However, anymore hologram trips were postponed until tomorrow night, the women insisted. They felt it was too late now and declared tired people might make mistakes. Helen, particularly wanted to be present when they went too.

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