

The Little Alien and the Fire
The Little Alien Trilogy Book 1

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Chapter 1: In Trouble ... Again

He stood at the top of a very tall cliff. When he was just a hatchling, they wouldn't let him play here in case he fell. Maybe that was why he now liked this place so much, or maybe it was just because of the fantastic view. From here you could see everything. Starting at the base of the cliffs and stretching out - like a sea - almost to the horizon, was a huge forest of tongue trees. Their big, broad leaves were unrolled in the afternoon sunshine, and a strong breeze chased countless ripples across the canopy. Only the desolate Garrick Mountains finally stemmed the tide. These emerged, grey and sullen, from the endless greenery, and their peaks were lost in the clouds. One day, thought the Little Alien, I'll climb those. Although, he had heard that they went so high you needed to wear a spacesuit at the top, and he wasn't sure where he would find one of those nowadays. Then, away to the left, there was the city. It must have been very beautiful once, and it was still impressive, even though it had been half overgrown by the forest. A sparkling river picked its way between the buildings. The elders said that, in ancient times, people used rivers for transportation, and that was why the city was built where it was. Now, however, the river was more of a barrier than a highway. While one bank was overgrown with trees, the other was clear and so was the rest of the city beyond. The Little Alien liked to explore both sides – fortunately, the old bridges were still standing. In fact, a lot of things in that ancient place were still working, and others could be coaxed into life with some simple repairs.

"I'm bored," said Squidge, and the Little Alien realised that he had been standing staring at the view for a long time. He scratched his chin with his claw and turned to his odd-looking friend.

"What shall we do?" he asked.

Squidge always had good ideas about what to do. The elders had made him especially for the Little Alien so that he would have someone to play with. There weren't any other children – everyone else was old. What was puzzling, however, was why they had made Squidge look so crazy. Why only two arms, rather than three, and why two hands but no claw or tentacle? It was totally impractical. Then there was his squidgy, pink body, his lack of scales and his spindly legs. Every time the Little Alien looked at Squidge he wanted to giggle.

"Let's ride stiltbirds," said Squidge, "Let's see if we can ride them all the way down to the city!"

"But, Squidge," protested the Little Alien, "you know what happened last time we rode stiltbirds. You fell and broke, and I had to fix you, and it took ages."

Squidge seemed to break a lot. When he was younger, the Little Alien would take him to one of the elders to be fixed, but the elders were always cross about him 'not looking after his toys', so the Little Alien had learnt how to mend Squidge himself. If he were honest, it was also that word *toy* that he didn't want to hear. He knew that Squidge was something that had been built - a thing and not a person - but he was also the only friend that the Little Alien had ever known. He and Squidge would always look after each other. Always.

"This time it'll be different," said Squidge, "This time I'll be able to hold on because I've been exercising and building up my muscles."

He then struck a series of ridiculous poses, trying to show off the tiny bulges in his arms and making his friend giggle helplessly.

“Okay, okay,” said the Little Alien when he had got his breath back, “Let me see if I can call some.”

He took out of his pocket a simple instrument - a small, flat whistle - which he began to blow through. No sound could be heard, but it must have been doing something because, before long, there was a squawking and flapping. A flock of huge birds came flying towards the edge of the cliff, their long legs almost touching the ground. As the birds went past, the Little Alien jumped up and grabbed one by the leg, whipping his tentacle around the other leg so that he had a good grip. The bird lurched and dropped down over the cliff, making the Little Alien’s stomach clench. Then it got used to the weight of its new passenger and continued to descend at a more gentle pace until it was skimming the tops of the trees. Turning his head, the Little Alien saw Squidge flying along beside him, clinging onto the bird’s legs with his funny pink hands and grinning madly. He waved to his friend with his claw. Of course, Squidge couldn’t wave back because he only had two arms, so instead, he stuck out his tongue. Both Squidge and the Little Alien loved this game, even though it was very dangerous. It felt just like you were running across the tops of the trees. With a bit of practice, they had found that they could steer the birds, although it was somewhat hit and miss. Now the Little Alien started to turn his bird away from the flock. He was heading back to the village because it would soon be time for dinner and he didn’t want to be left with miles to walk. Squidge pulled in alongside him, making whooping noises and pumping his legs up and down in the air. Then the village came in sight in the distance, and the Little Alien started to prepare himself. Although steering was hard, landing was even harder.

The trick was to fly your bird over the top of a tongue tree and then to let go at just the right moment. If you were lucky, you would slide right down one of the long leaves of the tree and land on the ground with no more than a little bump. If you got it wrong ... well, it was a long way down. It would mean some nasty bruises for the Little Alien and worse for Squidge, who was more fragile. The other thing was that you must not be seen by an elder because they did not approve of stiltbird riding. There would be a lecture about the abuse of nature, and it would include long words like ‘frivolous’ and ‘irresponsible’. Finally, there would be the sad shake of the head and the prediction that it would still be a long time before he was ready to take his proper place in the community. The Little Alien knew that, one day, he would become an elder himself, but he didn’t relish the idea – there was too much playing still to be done.

Right now, however, such thoughts could wait. They were coming up fast on the village, and the Little Alien needed to concentrate on landing. He looked over at Squidge and pointed down with his claw. Squidge nodded to show that he understood and steered his bird into formation behind his friend. Next, the Little Alien started to look for a suitable landing tree: too short; too tall; leaves rolled up. Aha – just right! He steered towards this one, knowing that Squidge would follow at a safe distance. As he approached the tree, he did a countdown in his head, 3-2-1, and when it got to zero, he let go. The bird squawked, happy to be free of the heavy load, and for a few seconds, the Little Alien was falling through air, wondering if he had got his timing right. Just as he was beginning to worry, his bottom touched down on one of the big leaves of the tree, and he was sliding towards the ground. His relief, however, was short-lived. The leaf was wet from some recent rain, and he wasn’t slowing down like he usually would. He went ‘whoosh’ down the slippery surface, and ‘whoosh’ up came the ground to meet him. The next thing he knew, he was tumbling and skidding along the forest floor until he came to a stop, shaken but unhurt, right in front of an elder. Not just any elder,

the Little Alien realised as he squinted up, but Bodger – possibly the dullest and grumpiest of them all.

What was Bodger doing this far from the village? Now he was going to be in trouble but maybe not too much trouble - if he was polite. He was just opening his mouth to apologise when there was a cry from behind. Elder and youngster both looked up as Squidge came cartwheeling through the air. He was going fast - too fast to be able to stop himself - and as his friend looked on in horror, he went crash, slap, bang into the elder, leaving them both in a heap. Bodger was the first to recover, standing up, whirling a tentacle around Squidge's leg and then lifting him into the air. Squidge wriggled and jiggled, but the elder held him fast. He carried him over and dumped him, squirming, in front of the Little Alien.

"I believe this belongs to you, Yun," said Bodger before turning and stomping off in the direction of the village.

Oh dear, thought the Little Alien. The elders did not often speak, so Bodger must be very angry indeed. He had even called him by his name – Yun – and names were hardly ever used in the village. Glumly, he stared after the figure that was fast disappearing amongst the trees, already anticipating dreadful consequences. It wasn't that the elders were cruel. Mostly, they spent their time sitting around thinking or doing other equally boring things. Sometimes they would talk to the Little Alien, usually to try and teach him things, and although they never wanted to play, they always tried to be kind. They could be strict, however, and the Little Alien was quite scared of them. He wasn't looking forward to finding out how he would be punished for this escapade. Maybe he would be set to work cleaning the huts, or maybe it would be chopping back the forest, which was always trying to creep in and take over, or maybe it would be the worst punishment of all – a whole day of silence. The Little Alien helped Squidge to his feet, and in a sombre mood, they plodded back to the village.

That evening at dinner, however, there was only one mention of their crash landing and, thankfully, no mention of punishment. It was the habit of everyone in the village to gather together at dinner. They sat at a long communal table that was enclosed by a colonnade - two parallel rows of stone pillars topped by a finely carved wooden roof which, here and there, still boasted a few remaining flakes of brightly-coloured paint. The villagers gathered to eat, of course, but also to share their new ideas and discoveries from the day just gone. It was the most talking that ever happened, and even though almost all of it was deadly dull, the Little Alien never missed dinner if he could help it because, you see, he was allowed to take a turn himself. When everyone had got their food and sat down, it began. Altus always went first, then Bodger, Cadmus and so on. The elders were so dull that they sat in the same seats for every meal, and although no one had ever confirmed this, the Little Alien guessed that they sat in order of age. This meant that Altus, who sat at the head of the table, was the oldest, and he, the youngest, sat nearest the forest - next to Xeno. Xeno was probably the most junior of the elders. He was certainly the most friendly, and although he could never be considered playful, he was a little more understanding of the Little Alien than the others.

When it was time, Altus stood up to begin the ritual. He opened his mouth to speak. The Little Alien felt the other elders sit up and pay attention. Altus's words were few and far between, and they were always considered very wise. The eldest elder paused like this, with his mouth open, for a few seconds. Then he reconsidered. His lips clamped shut. He shook his head and sat down. So it was Bodger's turn, and the Little Alien's heart sank. Bodger was looking right at him.

“I was on the verge of a brand new thought about the very nature of life itself,” he said, “but then I was bowled over by a child’s toy.”

Bodger glared pointedly towards the end of the table, as if there could be any doubt as to which child was to blame, and then he sat down with a thump. The Little Alien felt the scales on his head grow hot with embarrassment as a few of the elders turned to look at him, shaking their heads sadly.

“I think you’d better find somewhere well away from the village to play tomorrow,” whispered Xeno, leaning over.

The Little Alien nodded and sighed, but soon he forgot his embarrassment and started to think hard about what he would say when it was his turn. One by one, the elders aired their thoughts. Cadmus explained an idea he’d had about music having been created by the flickering of the stars. Someone else gave a short lecture on the nature of time. Many, like Altus, had nothing to say. Finally, it came to the Little Alien’s turn. As always, a few of the elders got up and started clearing their plates as soon as Xeno had finished speaking. It didn’t matter to the Little Alien. He solemnly stood and cleared his throat.

“Today,” he said, “I learnt that tongue tree leaves are more slippery when they’re wet.”

There were some mutterings, and a few more elders got up and left.

“And I learnt that it can rain in some places and not in others,” continued the Little Alien, thinking about how dry it had been on the cliff top.

“And I learnt that, even if you don’t see the rain, the leaves will still be wet,” he concluded.

By now all the elders, except Xeno, were getting up from the table. When the Little Alien spoke these last words, however, a few of them paused, seemed to think for a second and then went back about their business. Xeno said nothing. He just gave the Little Alien a pat on the back with his tentacle and then left the table.

On the way back to his hut, the Little Alien looked up at the stars and tried to imagine music coming from them. There was a band of white that swept the sky each night, and at the middle of this, there was a disk where the stars were so thick that they blurred together and you couldn’t tell one from the other. This was the very centre of the galaxy, and unless it was cloudy, it lit the night so brightly that there was no need for a glow-globe. Although this central belt was magnificent, the Little Alien liked the times when it wasn’t in the night sky. Then he could see the fainter stars that lay out towards the edges of the galaxy. They looked delicate and beautiful, as they twinkled against the pitch black background. Sometimes he was sure he could see pictures of animals or people, outlined by these lonely stars. He longed to know their names and fantasised about travelling to them. Maybe, he would meet outlanders – although Xeno said that these were just a myth.

He spent so long looking at the stars that, by the time he got back to the hut, Squidge was already asleep. The elders did not let Squidge eat with the rest of them because, they said, he didn’t have nice manners. So, Squidge ate his dinner alone. He sat at the edge of the forest to munch and crunch and chew his way through the selection of nasty-looking foods that the repomat machine made for him. He ate like this, in the forest, even when it was cold or raining. Once and only once, the Little Alien had allowed him to eat inside the hut. He had dropped crumbs everywhere, and in the night, a whole herd of scavenger worms had come in, drawn by the smell of the food. They ate up all the crumbs. Then they ate up the mat. Then

they woke up Squidge by squirming all over him while they looked for more food. Then Squidge woke up the Little Alien by jumping up and down, squeaking and trying to brush the worms off himself. Then they both woke up the rest of the village as they tried to get all the worms out of the hut. *That* was why Squidge always ate outside.

Usually, the Little Alien would be asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow, but tonight he lay awake for a while. Thoughts rushed around his head as he stared up at the gloom amongst the eaves of the hut. He had had a lucky escape with Bodger, and he didn't really understand why. Also, he seemed to have done something right when he spoke about the wet leaves, although he couldn't see what. At least there was one question that was easy to answer – where to play tomorrow that would be far from the village? The best place, and the most exciting, was the city. There was so much to explore and always something new to discover. Best of all, the Little Alien felt in his bones that if he was ever going to meet an outlander, it would happen in the city. Everyone always said that their species was the only intelligent life in the galaxy, but having seen the vastness of the night sky, that seemed to be an impossibility. So far it was just a belief - a hope, a dream – but tomorrow, in the city, maybe he would find proof.

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Chapter 2: The City

Just as he always did, the Little Alien jumped out of bed practically as soon as he woke up. There was so much to do, and there always seemed to be so little time, so he didn't want to waste a second. Plans for the day already whirling round in his head, he ran to the repomat to organise a packed lunch. Using the repomat was one more of the many things that were forbidden to Squidge. You would think that there was little harm to be done with a machine that made food appear from thin air, but Squidge seemed to have a special gift for mayhem. The last time he used the repomat, it had produced a Branak – a long-extinct creature that moved by blinking. It caused chaos in the village, blinking its way into store cupboards and huts, before the elders managed to chase it away into the forest. So, it was the Little Alien who always went to the repomat for food.

“Packed lunch, please,” was all he had to say to the machine that sat beside the dining colonnade, and two bundles of sandwiches appeared in the serving slot. The Little Alien scooped these up and returned to their hut. Here he found that Squidge, who had been gathering together everything they would need for their expedition, was just loading the last of the things into a rucksack. The packed lunch went in on top, he lifted the pack onto his back and they were ready to go. Together, they walked through the forest - the sights and sounds of the early morning all around them. The ground underfoot was still wet with dew, and the fronds of bracken on the forest floor were slowly unrolling as the first of the sunlight broke through the trees above. The Little Alien reached up with his tentacle and pulled a tongue nut from a tree as they went past. Then he used his claw to slice it in two, passing one half to Squidge and keeping the other half for himself. It made a very delicious breakfast, although it did take a lot of chewing. They both ate as they walked, neither wanting to waste any time. They had a long way to go, and they were both excited about what they might find.

The sun was fully up, and it had begun to get quite warm when they arrived at the outskirts of the city. It was always a surprise suddenly to see a building among the trees, and the first they encountered today gave a particularly startling impression. Vegetation was growing up all around it, blocking the lower doors and windows, but it still stood proudly – defiant against the encroaching forest. Higher up, as if in reward for such determination, the silver sheen of the ancient materials became visible through the green covering. Plants quite often grew up and around the old buildings, but they were never able to get a good grip on the walls themselves. They certainly never seemed to cause any damage, and the Little Alien believed that whoever had constructed the city had intended that it should survive for all time.

They pressed on, moving further in, and the buildings grew in number until, finally, a network of streets became defined by the green and silver walls. It was impossible, from the outside, to tell what each structure had been - whether a house, an office, a shop or a factory. They had discovered long ago that you had to explore the inside to really find anything interesting. At first, they had planned to work systematically through the buildings, but that was too dull and too slow. The city was too big, and there was no easy way to track where they had explored and where they hadn't. So now they headed for a special landmark that had come to be the starting point for all their expeditions to the city. Now they headed for the tower.

The tower was the tallest structure anywhere in the city. The base was overgrown and surrounded by plants, just like any other building on this side of the river, but the top reached up far above the trees. On clear days, with the sunshine glittering on its shiny surfaces, it

could be seen for miles around – even from the cliff top where they had played yesterday. Because this was the building they visited most frequently, the entrance was quite clear of plants, and the two friends made their way straight inside. Silently and through sheer force of habit, they walked directly to the very centre of the tower. This was where the ascension tube was located.

It felt like years ago when they had first explored the tower and had found the tube. The Little Alien had been scared and cautious, but Squidge had dared him to go inside, so he had. Even now, he still remembered the strange feeling as his feet had lifted off the ground that first time and he had started to float upwards. It had seemed wonderful, to begin with, but almost immediately, the wonder had turned to panic as he realised he couldn't stop. Squidge had grabbed his feet, but he had been pulled into the tube as well, and together they had drifted slowly higher - scrabbling at the featureless sides all the way up. They had been relieved when they got to the top and were able to climb out of the tube, and relief had turned to delight when they walked onto the observation platform and saw the beautiful city spread out below them.

How happy they had been until one of them, the Little Alien couldn't remember who, had thought to ask how they would get down. Squidge had tried stepping back into the tube – gingerly at first because he was stepping into thin air – but he had just hovered there, going neither up nor down. An icy feeling of hopelessness had crept over the Little Alien then, and he had sat down on the floor and cried. Squidge had cried as well. They had both been quite young, and it had really seemed at the time like they were trapped forever at the top of that tower. When they had finished crying, the Little Alien had tried the tube again, and this time, he had discovered its secret. It all depended on where you pointed your toes. They had escaped from their prison, but the Little Alien had never lost the memory of those feelings – wonder, despair, triumph – all mixed up in a confusing jumble. He was sure that there was some lesson to be learnt if he could just untangle all those different strands.

“Yun ... Yun! Are we going to stand here all day?”

Squidge's voice broke through the memories, and the Little Alien came back to the moment. Stepping into the tube, he pointed his toes upwards and started to drift towards the top.

“Faster!” shouted Squidge from below, and soon they were both zooming higher, making the trip to the observation deck in only a few seconds. Emerging onto the platform, their steps slowed as they gazed around them. Every time they saw this view, it took their breath away. The whole city lay at their feet, the buildings glinting in the morning sunshine, and they couldn't resist the urge to point out the things they remembered and the things they thought had changed. Only when they were satisfied that they had marked all of their domain, did they start to discuss where they would go exploring today. The first decision was which side of the river they would look – the forest side or the tree-free side.

“Free,” said Squidge, meaning he wanted to go on the tree-free side. The Little Alien wasn't so sure.

“I think it might rain,” he said, looking at the dark clouds gathering around the mountains, “It would be better to be in the forest, where the trees will give us some shelter.”

Squidge shivered and nodded. He hated getting wet. He said that it made him feel cold all the way to his bones. He knew that you could not always be sure of getting a door open before the rain started, and rainstorms could be heavy in the forest.

That decided, they both began to look for a suitable destination. With exaggerated seriousness, the two friends strode about the observation deck, pointing out possible targets to each other. They loved to pretend that they were explorers from ancient times who had landed on a far-off planet and discovered a deserted city, just like this one.

“How about that tall building over there?”

“Nah. Think of all the stairs. It would be too tiring.”

“That one then. That one’s tiny.”

“Don’t you remember? That’s the farcaster.”

The Little Alien cringed at the thought. They had found the little cubicle in one of the wide streets, and Squidge had persuaded him to go inside – even though there was only room for one of them and the Little Alien was scared of getting stuck. As soon as the door had closed, the walls had started to glow with a soft light.

“Destination?” said a polite voice inside the Little Alien’s head. He was far too surprised to have answered, even if he had understood, and while he stood there trying to make sense of it, the voice spoke again.

“Please state the name of the destination you require.”

Wow, thought the Little Alien, a teleport machine. Well, he knew exactly where he wanted to go.

“The village,” he said, thinking how surprised Squidge would be when he discovered that the cubicle was empty, but his answer clearly wasn’t good enough for the machine.

“There are over one thousand destinations fitting that description,” said the mysterious voice, “Please be more precise.”

The Little Alien thought carefully. His village had had another name once. He’d heard the elders use it.

“Ringwood Village,” said the Little Alien after a pause. Then he screwed his eyes up tight shut and waited.

“To whom do you wish to connect?” asked the voice briskly, making the Little Alien open his eyes in surprise, “I am tracking 25 residents of Ringwood Village, including yourself.”

“Xeno,” replied the Little Alien, without a second thought.

“The destination ‘Xeno’ is not recognised,” said the voice, “You may select by number if you wish.”

The Little Alien wasn’t very sure, but he thought back to the order of seating at dinner and decided to take a chance.

“I wish to connect with twenty-four,” he said.

It had been a disaster, and the Little Alien shuddered again as he looked down at the tiny cubicle. Twenty-four, it turned out, was not Xeno but Bodger, and he was not at all pleased when the Little Alien had appeared before him out of thin air. In fact, he had fallen off his chair in surprise. Once he had got up and dusted himself down, he had gone to shoo the unwanted visitor out of his house, but his tentacle had passed right through the Little Alien’s

body, and he had almost fallen again. Then he seemed to understand, and he got properly angry.

“Oh, I see, a farcaster,” he said, waving one finger at the Little Alien, “You’re just a hologram. I guess your body must be in the city - in one of those silly little cubicles. I bet you think you’re very clever, using that ancient technology to play your little tricks. Well, I hope you found it funny because now I’m going to talk to Altus, and you can bet that there’ll be a nice little job waiting for you when you get back.”

And with that, Bodger did something with his claw, the cubicle went black and the door opened up onto the street, where Squidge was waiting.

No, they would not go there again.

The Little Alien looked around for somewhere else, his eyes passing over a hundred different structures until they fixed on the perfect place. A long, low building that was almost completely hidden by the trees around it. The Little Alien would have missed it altogether if it hadn’t been for the cloud of skyfishers hovering above it. Many had been the time when they had chosen a building to explore from up in the tower only to find it impossible to locate once they had returned to the ground. As long as the birds did not move, there would be no such problems with this place. He poked Squidge, to get his attention, and pointed.

“A sign!” exclaimed Squidge, nodding enthusiastically, and without another word, they jumped into the ascension tube and whizzed to the ground.

The long, low building *was* easy to find. The skyfishers stayed helpfully in place and did not show any sign of moving even when the two friends had arrived. They could see the little birds darting here and there, their colourful wings flashing in the sunlight as they chased after the insects they wanted for lunch. The Little Alien was still staring up through the trees at the beautiful and deadly dance when Squidge called to him.

“Yun, over here. I’ve found the entrance.”

His friend looked so funny, hopping about from foot to foot and pointing with one of his stubby little fingers. It didn’t help that, amongst all the greenery of the forest, Squidge’s pink skin looked even more bizarre than usual. The Little Alien suppressed a giggle as he followed the direction of the pointing finger. Sure enough, there was the unmistakable outline of a door, but when they walked up, it did not open. The Little Alien had to get his tentacle underneath and heave and heave before it swished upwards, revealing a dark room beyond. It was clear that the whole building had been disconnected from the power grid. This would not stop them exploring, but it would make things more difficult. The best thing to do – they knew from experience – would be to head for the main utility room, which was usually in the basement, and try to reconnect the power from there.

It was dark in the building, and although his friend had brought out a glowglobe, Squidge felt very uneasy as they picked their way through the dusty corridors. He could sense things scuttling around behind him, but when he looked, there was nothing to be seen. It did not help that the globe was bobbing around on its tether and casting scary shadows on the wall. All in all, Squidge was very happy when Yun stopped by some stairs and pointed downwards – indicating that they were going to the basement.

The two of them were now operating in ‘silent mode’ – something that had started as a game but had now become part of their standard way of exploring. In silent mode, they had to move as quietly as possible and certainly never, ever speak. Instead, they would signal to

each other with their hands or bodies. They had various signs for things – like ‘stop’ or ‘left’ or ‘right’, and they had even started to develop more complex signs for ‘which way now’ and ‘I need some water’. Squidge was sure that, one day, they would be able to have whole conversations without speaking a word. What he wasn’t so sure about was why they used silent mode all the time. Although they often went exploring in the city, they had never once met another person, and wild animals did not seem to like coming into the buildings. He had asked Yun about it once, and the only response he had got was that it was in case of outlanders – as if they even existed. Now, as he walked down the stairs into the inky blackness of the basement, Squidge was not so sure. He imagined that there might be a whole squadron of outlanders waiting in the dark. One of the steps creaked under his weight, and he jumped a little. When he moved forwards again it was with a great deal more care, and he made it to the bottom of the stairs without making another sound.

From here, they went deeper into the basement, with the Little Alien leading the way and trying to imagine where someone would put a utility room in a building like this. Four times he signalled a stop, to open a likely looking door, and four times they were disappointed. Then, the fifth time, the Little Alien stopped in front of a door that Squidge felt sure must be the right one. This was because there was a red plaque on the door, and against the red background, there was a picture of a white lightning bolt. There must be electrical things in this room.

Slowly, the Little Alien pushed open the door, and they both peered inside as the light from the glowglobe illuminated the interior. In the middle of the room was a table and some chairs. One of the chairs had been pushed over, but the others stood around as if placed for a meal – or a game. Beyond the table, set against the back wall, was a row of grey cabinets that were each as tall as the room itself. As the Little Alien moved inside the room, bringing the glowglobe with him, Squidge could see that there was a big metal switch on the middle cabinet. This, he thought, must be the main power for the building. His friend advanced towards the switch, intending to turn on the power, but he stopped short.

“What’s wrong?” asked Squidge, forgetting about silent mode in his impatience to get the lights on again. Even here, in this small room, he felt like he was being studied by a thousand pairs of eyes. The Little Alien did not answer. He just pointed. There, on the switch, hung a big red notice.

“What does it say?” asked Squidge, who couldn’t read.

“I don’t know,” replied the Little Alien, who couldn’t read either, “I just know that red means danger. Maybe we should explore somewhere else.”

Squidge thought about the long trip back through the dark, and he looked out into the corridor where he was sure he could see things scuttling in the shadows. He thought it was worth the risk to pull the switch.

“We don’t know it is a warning sign,” he said, “It might just be a sign saying ‘main power switch’”

Then, after a bit more thought, he continued.

“Even if it is a warning sign, the danger will be long gone. This building has been deserted for ages.”

The Little Alien was not convinced. He did not want to get into trouble with the elders, but he did not want to look scared in front of his friend either. He didn't say anything. He just stood staring at the switch and shaking his head.

"Go on, what's the worst that could happen?" went on Squidge, "Besides, we might find something really cool in this building. We might find a flying machine or a hologame or ..."

And then Squidge said the one thing that was always guaranteed to get his friend to take any risk.

"Or we might find an outlander!"

Sure enough, the temptation was too great. The Little Alien reached out with his tentacle and pulled the switch.

There was a slight fizzing sound, and with a flicker, all the lights came on. For a split second, both of them were sure they had seen a thousand little creatures, stopped still and frozen in the sudden brightness. Then, in the blink of an eye, they were gone. Squidge shook his head, as if to clear it of something.

"See," he announced, "I told you nothing bad would happen."

Now they really started their exploration, going back into silent mode and working their way quickly through the rest of the basement. Finding nothing, they moved back upstairs, taking a different staircase from the one they had used to go down. Trusting to his friend, Squidge had completely lost track of where they were in the building, but he was enjoying himself a lot more now that the lights were on. He had almost forgotten about the little scuttling shapes in the dark. Anyway, Yun seemed confident enough as he led the way through corridors, offices and even a big room that looked like a canteen. Squidge scanned the walls looking for a repomat because he was beginning to feel hungry, but there wasn't one. He wondered where all the workers had got their meals from when the building had been occupied. The Little Alien led them onwards, finding very little of interest until they finally came out into a huge hall with a high ceiling. Squidge guessed it was some kind of factory because there were workbenches scattered about, with odd-looking devices perched on some of them. These looked like they would be fun to play with, and Squidge was tempted to go and push some of the buttons. He was staring greedily at one contraption that looked like it had a big blade sticking out of it, when he walked straight into the back of the Little Alien. His friend had stopped dead in his tracks and was gazing towards the centre of the hall. There sat one of the most enormous machines that Squidge had ever seen.

It was shaped like a huge egg, and it was made from a shiny silver material that had been dulled only slightly by age. The egg was laid on its side, supported by about a hundred little legs, so that it almost touched the floor at the bottom. At the top, the bulge of the egg would have scraped the ceiling if it had not been for a raised section of the roof at just that point. Had he been looking, Squidge would have noticed that this part of the roof was built on rails – a door to the sky - but instead, his attention was entirely focused on two short columns that stood immediately in front of the machine. One had a glass box at the top, and on the other sat an interface terminal. The terminal was of a similar design to ones they had found on their previous explorations, and Squidge was itching to see what it would do. He ran over, gave it a tentative tap and was delighted when it came alive with a slight pop. Immediately, he started playing around with the controls. At first, he thought that his taps, swipes and clicks were having no effect, but then he heard a soft "Wow!" coming from beside him as the Little Alien broke silent mode for the first time since they had left the utility room. Squidge looked

around and saw that his friend was staring at something in the glass box on top of the other column. It was such a little thing that it could barely be seen, but when Squidge moved over, he found that the box magnified whatever was inside so he could see it clearly. It looked like an insect.

“Where did that come from?” he asked.

“You made it,” answered the Little Alien, “It appeared when you started messing with the interface terminal.”

They looked at the ordinary-looking insect underneath the box, and they both had the same idea.

“Do you think we can make it really freaky looking?” said the Little Alien, putting the shared thought into words.

Squidge started playing with the terminal again, seeing what he could do. Although he could not read any of the labels on the controls, he could see that each twiddle or tap resulted in a little change to the insect. First, it got big, googly eyes. Next, he gave it wings. Soon, Squidge found that he was getting the hang of the controls and that he was able to make very precise changes to the insect.

“What do you think would annoy the elders the most?” he asked.

The Little Alien thought very hard before answering.

“What about if it had an annoying buzz,” he said at last, “and what if it was attracted to scales?”

Squidge worked away, concentrating hard, until he felt he had got things just right.

“All done,” he called, “Let’s have a look at my masterpiece.”

The two friends crowded around the glass box and peered in at the insect. Now it was dark red with big eyes, wings and what looked like a little, hooked beak. It buzzed around inside the case, making a high-pitched whining sound that set their teeth on edge. Then, all of a sudden, the insect went wild, hurtling backwards and forwards, and banging into the sides of the box so hard that it shook.

“No, no my little one!” shouted Squidge in alarm, “Calm down, or you’ll hurt yourself.”

Before the Little Alien could stop him, he had lifted the box off the top of the column, letting the insect free. It immediately flew onto the Little Alien’s head and attached itself to his scales.

“Ouch! Ouch!” he cried, “It’s biting me. Get it off.”

As he shouted, he danced around, waving and swatting wildly with his hand, his claw and his tentacle. After a few moments, he landed a solid blow on his tiny attacker, and it fell to the ground, quite crushed.

“Sorry,” said the Little Alien as he and Squidge looked down at the silent body, “but it really hurt. Look at the lump I’ve got on my head.”

Squidge shrugged his shoulders, wanting to show he understood but not quite being able to say that it was okay. He tried tapping the terminal a couple of times, but it seemed to have turned itself off. Then he thought of something and brightened up.

“Shall we go outside and have our lunch?” he asked, “Then we can do some more exploring.”

The two headed out of the hall, already debating where they would go next. They didn’t notice that, behind them, the big silver egg was starting to hum and shake.

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Chapter 3: Under Attack

They decided to climb a tree to have their lunch so that they could sit up in the branches and spot interesting looking buildings. Because they were both famished, their chosen tree was not far away from the factory, and it provided a good view of the entire structure. The Little Alien began to study it closely as he munched his sandwiches, trying to figure out the route they had taken on their exploration. One thing was clear, the position of the big, silver egg was marked by a higher part of the roof, right in the middle of the building. The Little Alien was just giving it a closer look when it started to move.

“Look!” he called to Squidge, “The roof’s opening.”

Sure enough, a split had appeared right in the middle of the raised section, and the two halves were moving slowly apart. They continued until the gap was quite wide enough to see the top of the egg beneath. At this point it stopped, and there was a pause. This lasted only a few heartbeats until a crack appeared on the surface of the egg itself. The crack widened, bit by bit, and something started to emerge - like a trail of smoke, curling out of the egg and rising up through the open roof. The skyfishers dived down eagerly, but whatever they found was clearly not to their taste, and the whole flock quickly scattered. Still, the two friends did not understand what was happening until the noise reached them. It was a high-pitched whining sound that made their teeth ache.

“Oh no,” said Squidge, “It’s that insect I made.”

“Except now there’s thousands of them,” squealed the Little Alien, “Come on! We’ve got to get out of here.”

The Little Alien still had the bump on his head to remind him how painful it had been to be attacked by just one of those insects, so he was down the tree in a flash and running to find cover. When he looked back, to check that Squidge was following, he was amazed to see his friend still up in the tree, packing up their lunch.

“Quick! Forget the food,” he shouted, “Those things are dangerous.”

Squidge looked hungrily at the sandwiches that were still lying on the branch, but he realised that the Little Alien was right and started down to the ground. He did, however, bring the empty lunch bag - something that they would both be thankful for later.

Meanwhile, the whining was getting louder, and the Little Alien decided that he had better keep running. He hoped that these insects, like the first, would be more interested in his scales than Squidge’s pink, squidgy skin. It certainly sounded like the swarm had targeted him for lunch. The buzzing grew louder as he ran, and by the time he finally reached the nearest building, it seemed to be right on top of him. Grateful to find the door open, he jumped inside and turned, ready to slam it as soon as his friend arrived. Squidge, having found a new gear for his spindly legs, was now only a few paces away - the insects crowded behind him in a big, dark mass. It looked like they had decided he was quite tasty after all because, on the threshold, he gave a sharp yelp and rocketed forward into the house. The Little Alien pulled the door shut as fast as he could, and only a few of the vicious little beasts were able to get inside. The two made short work of these, swatting them with hands, bag, tentacle and, in one case, with the doormat. The battle over, they fell back against the wall, panting and trying to get their breath.

“What are we going to do?” asked the Little Alien once he had recovered enough to speak.

“We’ll just have to wait here until they’ve gone,” replied Squidge, “They can’t stay out there forever.”

The Little Alien gave him a hard stare.

“I wasn’t worried about us,” he said, “I was thinking of the elders. Sooner or later, those insects will find the village. All those scaly heads will drive them into a frenzy. They’ll bite everyone to pieces.”

Squidge started to look really worried.

“We have to warn them,” he said.

“Yes,” agreed the Little Alien, “We have to get to the farcaster.”

The sound of the annoying whine was still coming through the door - clearly, they couldn’t go out that way - so for the second time that day, they started to explore.

The building where they were trapped was not large by the standards of the city, but it did have lots of floors. By agreement, they started at the top and worked their way down. They were looking for two things. They needed a way out of this place, preferably where there weren’t any insects, and they needed a way to get to the farcaster without being eaten alive. To do this, they would need to be very well protected, very fast or maybe invisible. Still, they had found so many amazing things already in this city that they were confident something would turn up. As for an exit, they were less hopeful. The city builders did not seem to have liked windows, except where they served a special purpose – like at the top of the observation tower. The Little Alien and Squidge had seen all sorts of devices and mechanisms to replace windows, but no matter how beautiful or practical, they had never really felt right. Now it was clear why.

They did find some bits and pieces that looked useful. The Little Alien got a pot that fitted nicely over his head and covered his scales. Squidge got a bit piece of thick material, which he wrapped around himself like a cloak. As they went down each floor, however, they became more and more nervous. Soon, the insects would grow bored of waiting and go looking for easier prey. Then it would be too late to warn the elders. By the time they reached the ground floor again, the Little Alien was despairing. Convinced that there was nothing to be found, he let Squidge lead the exploration. Squidge, however, was determined to search thoroughly right to the end, and his efforts were rewarded when he opened a small, insignificant door in the very last room. Behind the door, offering one last avenue of hope, were stairs going down. Following these cautiously, they found themselves in a basement. At first, it seemed just as bare as the rest of the house. When their eyes adjusted to the gloom, however, they saw, to one side of the room, the bottom of a chute that disappeared upwards into a narrow corridor. At a sign from Squidge, the Little Alien clambered up the chute and crawled into the dusty tunnel, re-emerging some seconds later.

“It doesn’t go far – just out under the street behind the house,” he said, “Then there’s a hatch. It’s a way out, and I can’t hear any buzzing!”

However safe it seemed, they agreed that it was best to put on the protective gear they had collected. The Little Alien put the pot on his head. Squidge tied the cloak around his shoulders. After this, the plan was simple: climb the chute, open the hatch, climb out into the

street and then run to the farcaster to warn the elders. The first three steps went okay, but as soon as they were out into the street, things went wrong. Looking around, the Little Alien spotted a vast cloud of the insects heading off through the trees in the direction of the village. He couldn't stop himself from crying out in dismay. How could he have known that the insects had such good hearing? How could he have known that some of the insects had stayed to guard the door of the house? Round the corner they came. A small swarm of angry, biting things heading right for the Little Alien, who stood frozen to the spot as they got closer and closer until ... whumph. A large, thick, heavy cloak was thrown over the whole lot of them – like a net cast over a shoal of fish.

“Quick, run!” shouted Squidge, and he jumped on top of the cloth, stamping up and down like he was dancing a jig. At first, the Little Alien didn't understand why, until he saw that insects were crawling out from under the cloth at all its edges. They were a little dazed, a little shaken, but they were far from beaten.

“Go! Now!” shouted Squidge again as the first of the escaping insects took to the air with their annoying whine, “I'll be fine. You've got to warn the elders.”

The Little Alien hesitated for a second, not wanting to leave his friend, but he realised Squidge was right. He had to go, so off he sprinted as the whining sound grew louder behind him.

It was a long run to the farcaster. At first, the buzz and whine of the insects had died away, leaving only the sounds of rustling leaves and breaking twigs to mark the passage of the Little Alien through the city. Then, just as he was sure he was so close that nothing could stop him, the whining buzz of the insects came drifting to him on the breeze. He glanced around but could not locate the source of the noise. That was until his foot caught on a tree branch, and he went sprawling across the forest floor, ending up on his back and staring up at a swarm of insects coming for him over the treetops. In a flash, he was back on his feet and running faster than ever as the buzzing grew louder. He heard the first knocking sound of an insect bouncing off his pot at the same time as he saw the farcaster cubicle.

If it hadn't have been for his makeshift helmet, the Little Alien would have been done for. Fortunately, however, the insects were only interested in his head, and many of the first wave flopped to the ground, stunned after smashing into the hard pot. Still, the knocking sounds grew in frequency until it sounded like being in a rainstorm. Then it was so frequent that all the impacts merged into one, and it seemed like his head was in the middle of a ringing bell. As the noise reached a crescendo, and he felt like he must soon pass out, the Little Alien stumbled the last few steps and collapsed through the door of the farcaster. He was quickly on his feet again. Some of the insects had made it through the door before it closed behind him, and they made themselves busy finding out which part of him tasted best. He swatted and chopped and splatted until they were crushed or quivering on the floor, and then he turned his mind back to his mission. He had to warn the elders about the insects. He had to call the village. Now he had to remember what he had done to activate the farcaster last time and how he had got in touch with Bodger. He tried tapping, waving, clicking, swiping, jumping, clapping – which is difficult when you've only got one hand – and even hopping.

“Why won't you work!” he said aloud, in his desperation, and sank down into a little huddle on the floor.

“Please state the name of the destination you require,” said the voice of the farcaster, bringing the Little Alien back to his feet with a jolt.

“Ringwood Village,” he shouted, brimming with excitement and impatience, “Number two.”

The walls of the cubicle shimmered around him, and suddenly he found himself standing in the middle of the forest. He ducked instinctively, feeling exposed as the safety of the walls disappeared, but there were none of the insects here.

“Hello, what are you doing here?” said a kindly voice behind him. Then slightly more harshly, “Are you using a farcaster again? You know how much trouble you got into last time.”

The Little Alien turned around. Just as he had intended, he was face to face with Xeno, but now he struggled to find the right thing to say.

“We found this big, silver egg, and we made a nasty bitey insect, and we thought that was that, but then there were thousands of them, and we hid, and now they’re heading for the village, and I had to warn you,” he blurted out all at once.

Xeno looked a bit confused and a little concerned.

“What’s that thing on your head?” he asked. Then he stopped and listened, “And what’s that annoying buzzing sound?”

“That’s the insects,” shouted the Little Alien, “They’re attracted to scales, and they’re vicious biters. You’ve got to warn the others. Everyone’s got to get under cover.”

Now Xeno seemed to understand. He looked very seriously at the Little Alien and seemed close to being cross – even angry. Then he reached a decision.

“Well, you’ve caused a real mess here, so you’d better help fix it,” he said, “I need a head start to get back and sound the alarm. So I need you to stay here and take that pot off your head.”

“Don’t worry,” he added, seeing the frightened look on the Little Alien’s face, “They can’t hurt you. Stay until the insects get bored of you. Then you need to go and switch off the egg.”

“How do I do that?” asked the Little Alien, taking the pot off his head, but Xeno was already on his way, moving faster than he thought an elder could ever go. He watched the figure disappearing through the trees and then turned his attention in the other direction, where he could hear the angry buzzing of the insects growing louder by the second. Nervously he waited, every moment expecting to see the swarm appear over the tops of the trees. In fact, it was several minutes before the first dots appeared in the sky, and by this time the noise was deafening. At first, the Little Alien just stood and stared. Then he remembered that he was meant to be making time for Xeno to warn the village.

“Hey! Hey! Down here!” he shouted, jumping up and down and waving his arms and tentacle. The leading insects saw him and started to dive down in his direction. The Little Alien thought brave thoughts and held his ground ... until he saw the main body of the swarm emerging from the trees right in front of him. There were thousands of them coming for him like a great black cloud. Seeing them so numerous and so close made his nerve fail. He turned to run but found his way blocked by an invisible wall. It was at that moment that

the lead insects reached him. They had dived down from high in the sky, aiming for his scaly head. They were going so fast that, when they passed right through their intended target, they found they couldn't stop. Thunk, thunk, thunk. Three tiny bodies buried themselves into the ground at the Little Alien's feet. As he looked down at them, he saw a stream of insects emerging from his tummy. Then it seemed like there were clouds of insects flying through him from all angles. He was just a hologram, after all. There was nothing solid for the little beasties to hit or bite. Before long, the swarm had him completely surrounded, and the air was so thick with insects that it was difficult to see. The Little Alien kept calm, although with difficulty, and moved around in what he hoped was an appetising manner. He wanted to distract as many of the insects as he could for as long as possible.

It worked, for a while. Then the Little Alien noticed the air around him getting lighter, and soon there were only a few insects still circling round him, angry and confused. He didn't know if Xeno had had enough time to get the other elders to safety, but there was nothing more he could do here, so he decided he'd better return to the city. Just as he thought this, however, he felt a chill run down his spine. All this time, with the insects swarming around him, the Little Alien had kept calm by focusing on one big question – how to turn off the egg. Now he realised he had ignored an even bigger problem. How could he turn off the farcaster and get back to the city? Last time it had been Bodger who had broken the connection. He had done something with his claw, but the Little Alien couldn't remember exactly what. He experimented with various movements, each as useless as the last, as he tried desperately to remember what he had seen the elder do. Eventually, he realised that it was no good just trying moves at random. There was only one way he was going to get back to the city. He was going to have to go exploring on the inside.

The elders spent a lot of their time exploring on the inside. The Little Alien had tried it several times - Xeno had tried hard to teach him - but it had never really worked out well. There had always been other, more exciting, things to do, and that made it difficult to concentrate. Now, he was glad that Xeno had persisted in these sessions, even though he had probably been a poor pupil. He closed his eyes and started to take slow, deep breaths. Although his sight was now gone, his other senses still worked. He could hear the buzz of the remaining insects, feel the brush of the wind on his face and he could smell the damp odours of the forest surrounding him. Xeno had taught him that these were not distractions. They could all be used in creating his gateway – an imaginary place that formed his own, private entrance to the inside.

The Little Alien let himself relax as he imagined himself in a calm and soothing place. The buzzing was the gentle buzz of fireflies. The forest smell was the fragrance of a beautiful garden at night. As the breeze continued to blow over his face, he opened his eyes and found himself standing on a lawn of short, even grass. Here and there were fruit trees, their branches and leaves turned silver by the moonlight. A cloud of fireflies drifted around him, lighting the way with their warm glow. It was such a peaceful scene that the Little Alien immediately felt very relaxed and at home, despite the one odd feature of his new environment. Everywhere he looked there were doors and doorways. They were of all types, shapes and sizes: big, heavy wooden doors; doorways blocked by curtains that flapped in the breeze; archways that seemed to lead nowhere. In fact, they *all* seemed to lead nowhere. All the doorways stood, isolated and unconnected to any structure, as if they had simply grown up out of the lawn. Yet the Little Alien knew that things were not as they appeared. If he were to walk through any of these doors, he would find himself on the inside. For the Little Alien, a novice, this meant that he could travel back into his own past, visiting scenes from

his memory. The elders, who'd had more practice, could build entirely new realities, using things that they had learnt to create different ways of looking at the world.

Just at the moment, however, the Little Alien was only interested in going back to take a closer look at a very specific memory. He began to search among the doors, feeling himself being guided in a particular direction until his feet led him to a doorway that looked just like the entrance to Bodger's house. He took a deep breath and walked through.

Immediately and, it seemed, with no more effort than walking through a real door, the Little Alien found himself inside a hut. It was a simple house, much like all the others in the village, with just one room and a bed that was built into a hollow in the wall. There was a plain mat on the floor, on which stood a wooden chair. Bodger was sitting on the chair, but he gave no sign of having seen anyone enter. Now he had time to study the elder in more detail, the Little Alien thought he did not look so forbidding. In fact, he looked quite frail, and something seemed to be causing him a lot of pain. He would sit quite still for a while, with eyes closed. Then the pain would get too much, and he would jerk upright in the chair, crying out quietly before beginning to massage one or other of his limbs. The Little Alien began to feel sorry for this old man, with his achy joints, and desperately wanted to comfort him in some way. He became so lost in thoughts of how best to do this that it was quite a surprise when another Little Alien appeared in the room. Of course, it was him – his past self - and he then watched the pantomime unfold as Bodger first fell off his chair and then fell over again, trying to shoo the hologram out of his room. Finally, he saw how the elder cut the connection by opening his claw, swiping it to the left and closing it again. Having found what he needed, the Little Alien quickly backed out, returning through his gateway to reality. He tried to tell himself that the glistening he had seen in Bodger's eyes had been a flash of anger and not the first sign of restrained tears breaking loose. The swipe of his claw that brought him back to the farcaster, however, did nothing to remove the image of the old man alone and in pain. Only the pressure of more immediate problems allowed him to turn away from that picture as he focused on how to turn off the egg.

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Chapter 4: Who's the Bravest?

In order to deactivate the egg, the Little Alien needed to leave the farcaster, but when he had entered, there had been a swarm of angry insects after him. In all probability they were still there, waiting for him to come out. True, he had his helmet, and he would certainly be able to swat a small number. It all depended on how many were waiting. If there were a few, then he would stand and fight. If there were many, then he would have to run. Having decided this, the Little Alien took a deep breath and got ready to open the door. Then he stopped. He heard a strange noise outside. It was a buzzing noise but deeper than the buzzing of the insects and also louder. Maybe it was a new type of insect – bigger than the others – a king, perhaps. The Little Alien was still trying to imagine what the king insect would look like when there was a tapping at the door. It seemed clear that insects wouldn't knock – however regal they were – so the Little Alien plucked up his courage and opened the door. There stood Squidge. He had a big grin on his face, a strange cylindrical device on his back and a long tube held in both hands. Of the insects, there was no sign.

"It's a sucking machine," said Squidge, seeing the questioning look on the Little Alien's face, "I found it while I was hiding. I used it to suck up all the insects that were chasing me. Then I came to find you, and I sucked up all the insects around the farcaster."

Squidge waited for a second or two, and when his friend did not say anything, he continued.

"So we won, right? We can go home now?"

The Little Alien shook his head slowly. He explained about his meeting with Xeno and their new mission to deactivate the egg.

"How are we going to do that?" asked Squidge.

"You remember that red sign?" asked the Little Alien, "The one on the main power switch?"

Squidge nodded glumly, knowing what was coming.

"Well, I think that *was* a warning sign. I think that we have to go back and turn off that switch."

They arrived back at the factory building after a tiring jog through the forest. There was no way of knowing how long it would be before the egg released its next batch of insects, so they had gone as fast as they could for as long as they could. Squidge's legs felt like rubber as he walked in through the door, and he wondered why he had been in such a hurry to get back to a place that made him so nervous. Partly because he was tired and partly because he was a little scared, Squidge held back and let Yun take the lead. Once again, he found himself going down the steps into the basement, and all too soon, he found himself back in the utility room. All the time, he felt that something was watching him. Something that was hiding in the shadows. Something that could only be glimpsed from the corner of his eye. He was dreading what would happen next, and as Yun reached out his tentacle to pull the switch, his fear got the better of him.

"Wait!" he shouted, "Don't pull the ..."

But it was too late. There was a click, a slight fizzing and all the lights went out. Immediately, Squidge was sure he heard a scurrying noise, like a thousand tiny creatures emerging from a thousand different hiding places.

“Silly me,” said the Little Alien in the darkness, “I should have got the glowglobe out before I pulled the switch.”

His voice was quite calm. If his friend had heard the scurrying, Squidge thought, it clearly did not worry him.

“Wait a minute. I’ll get it out now.”

There were some more sounds, this time like pockets being opened, while all the time Squidge felt the presence of thousands of tiny eyes peering at him. Then at last:

“Here it is. It was ... Oops! I dropped it ... although, it felt more like it jumped out of my hand.”

Although he knew he shouldn’t be afraid of the dark, Squidge felt panic starting to creep up through his body. He just knew that things were about to take a bad turn, and he began to edge forwards - closer to the switch.

“I’ll just check on the floor. It can’t have rolled far,” he heard the Little Alien say, “How odd the floor feels. It’s kind of bumpy.”

For the first time, Squidge heard a note of uncertainty enter his friend’s voice, and he knew he had to act before it all went wrong. He pulled the switch.

This time, Squidge was certain what he saw, and he was certain what he heard. This time, the little black shapes did not scurry away into the shadows. They covered the floor, and they covered the walls, and a thousand of them stared at Squidge as they screamed in their tiny voices:

“It hurts, it hurts! Turn it off, turn it off, *please* turn it off!”

Squidge was rooted to the spot, too terrified to move. He did not even react when the Little Alien stepped smartly over to the cabinet and pulled the switch. With a click, the lights went off again, and Squidge was left in inky darkness, desperately trying to fight off waves of panic.

“Aaargh, aargh, aargh!” was all he managed to say.

“Keep calm,” said the Little Alien, putting a tentacle on what he thought was his friend’s shoulder.

“What’s that on my head?” squealed Squidge. Then, when he realised that it was just the Little Alien, “Why did you turn off the lights?”

“The light was hurting them,” explained the Little Alien simply.

“But now they’ll get us. The whole room is thick with them,” said Squidge, and although he sounded calmer, the Little Alien could feel his friend quivering in the darkness.

“I don’t think they mean us any harm,” he said, “After all, they did ask nicely.”

Then he raised his voice, as if to speak to the room as a whole.

“You’re not going to hurt us, are you?”

“We won’t hurt you,” came the squeaky reply from a thousand tiny mouths, “but please don’t start the brightness again. It burns.”

“What are you?” asked Squidge.

“We’re Cleaner Bugs,” the voices said, bursting with pride, “We were made in the big egg to keep the factory tidy. When all the workers go home and the lights go out, that’s when we come out and clean.”

“There are no workers,” said the Little Alien, “Not for a long time.”

“Yes, no workers now,” replied the bugs, “Not much to tidy. We were very sad. Then you came, and we followed you. We like you. You’re very dirty.”

Squidge opened his mouth to argue, but he quickly shut it again because he could not think of what to say. There was silence for a while.

“We can’t see in the dark,” said the Little Alien, “and we need to find our way out of here. Do you think I could use my glowglobe?”

“What?” replied the bugs, horrified, “You mean the little orb of pain?”

That seemed to answer that question, but it didn’t give the Little Alien any idea of how they could get out of the building - until the bugs spoke again.

“We could lead you out,” they said, “You could follow our voices. It’s just ... we’d miss you. Do you think you could take us with you?”

The Little Alien thought about this for a second.

“I couldn’t take you all,” he said, remembering how many bugs he had seen when the lights were on, “but a few of you could come with us in my bag.”

The bugs were overjoyed by this proposal and let out a great, high-pitched cheer. Then they started to call out, guiding Squidge and the Little Alien through the darkness to the exit – “Forward ... left a bit ... straight on ... door coming up.” At first, it worked quite well, but soon a low-level chirping started up and quickly got so loud that the directions were drowned out, sending Squidge and the Little Alien crashing into walls and bashing into door frames. This might sound harmless, even like a bit of a joke, but if you really walk into a wall in the dark, it hurts like anything. When it happened for the third time, the Little Alien stopped.

“What is that racket?” he said angrily, “We can’t hear the directions.”

“Sorry, we’re having a bit of an argument,” came the reply.

“What can you possibly be arguing about at a time like this?” Squidge asked.

“Who gets to go with you, of course,” they squeaked back, “It will be a great honour for a select few. We must choose the right ones, and we need to come to a decision before we reach the exit.”

“How about you have a race?” suggested Squidge, “Whoever’s the fastest gets to come with us.”

“Why the fastest?” said the Little Alien, “Why not the cleverest, or the best at cleaning?”

These suggestions were greeted with a huge volume of chirping as the argument broke out again, and this time it sounded like all of them were getting really angry. Squidge began

to worry that the bugs would argue forever, or worse that they would go off and leave him here in the dark.

“Quiet!” shouted the Little Alien, and when the chirping had stopped, he continued, “I know a way to choose who will go, and it will make sure that the most useful of you will come with us. If I tell you, will you promise to take us to the stairs with no more arguments?”

“We promise,” squeaked all the bugs together, “Please tell us.”

So the Little Alien explained that, in the village where he lived, there was day and there was night. During the day it would be far too bright for the bugs. They would have to stay inside, and the Little Alien would make a special house for them that would keep out the light. During the night it would be dark, but not as completely dark as the basement because of all the stars. The most useful bugs would be the ones that did not mind the light so much as the others.

“But we’re all scared of the light,” chirped the bugs, “How will we know who’s least scared?”

“Leave that to me,” said the Little Alien, “But now, please can you show us the way out?”

The bugs must have agreed because they started calling out directions again. After a while, the darkness began to seem less ... well, less *dark*, and not long after that, Squidge was sure he could see a slight glow ahead. Soon they found that they were at the bottom of the stairs, and the bugs would go no further, saying it was too bright. The two friends climbed the stairs, grateful that they had left the main door open, which now gave them enough light to see where they were putting their feet. When they emerged into the gloomy room above, the Little Alien took one step away from the stairwell and then stopped. Opening his bag and placing it on the floor, he went to shout down to the waiting bugs, but Squidge stopped him.

“What if they’re dangerous?” he said, “We don’t know what they might do to us, or to the elders, if we take them out of this place. We should leave them here.”

The Little Alien thought for a second. It was true that his recent experience with insects from the big egg had shown him that there were serious and unexpected dangers in the city. It did seem like it would be safer to leave the cleaner bugs behind. He drew back a little from the stair rail, but then he halted and shook his head.

“When we needed them, these bugs helped us. Even when we hurt them, they didn’t attack us. Besides, we gave them our word.”

Leaning back over the rail, the Little Alien shouted down into the darkness below:

“Okay, now the challenge begins. Whichever of you can make it up the stairs and into my bag can come with us.”

“But it’s light up there,” came the wailing cry from below.

“That’s right,” said the Little Alien, “That’s why it’s a challenge. Only the bravest will succeed.”

For a long while, there was only silence, and the Little Alien began to think he had made the challenge too difficult. Just as he was giving up hope, however, with a squeaking that was barely audible, one of the bugs appeared over the top step and scuttled across into the bag. Squidge was sure he heard a little cheer once the bug was inside. Whether this had been a

signal, or whether the others had already been on the way up, was impossible to tell. Whichever, there was soon a steady stream of cleaner bugs hauling themselves up over the top step and making the dash for the bag. The Little Alien got ready to move over and close the seal once there was no more room left, but just as quickly as it had begun, the stream turned into a trickle and then stopped altogether. When he ducked down to peek into the bag, the Little Alien saw that there was still plenty of room to spare. The bugs that were already inside had huddled together in the darkest depths, and they were packed together very tightly.

“There’s still some space,” The Little Alien called down the stairs, “Would anyone else like to come?”

There was a little shuffling sound from below, and the combined voice of the remaining bugs sounded out:

“We’ve decided we’d rather stay here, thank you.”

The Little Alien and Squidge looked at each other. Squidge shrugged, so the Little Alien picked up the bag, checked everyone inside was okay and pulled the seal closed. He was about to walk out of the building when Squidge seemed to have an idea. Telling his friend to stay put, he rushed outside, only to return a moment later with an armful of soil, grass and twigs, which he flung down the stairs. The Little Alien didn’t understand at first, not until he heard the chorus of chirping from below:

“That’s filthy. That’s disgusting ... Thank you!”

The two friends passed most of their journey back to the village in silence. They wanted to get back quickly in case the elders needed their help, but it was too far for them to run all the way. Instead, they settled into a gentle jog, slowing to a walk every now and again when their bodies gave them no choice. Neither of them was sure what they would find when they got back to the village or what they would do if they were suddenly confronted by a cloud of the biting insects. They discussed various plans, communicating in short, breathless sentences, but they never reached any firm conclusions. Certainly, they were not prepared for the scene of devastation that met their eyes when they finally reached the village.

All of the huts showed some signs of damage, with at least two having been completely destroyed - the rubble that remained sending trails of smoke up into the still evening air. Many of the elders sat around, on steps or benches, with bumps rising all over their bodies. They seemed to have been very shaken by their experience, and they stared quietly into the distance or rested their heads in their hands. Some of them were even crying. Those few who had escaped serious harm moved among the others offering medical treatment, water to drink and words of comfort. All across the village were scattered the bodies of the insects. They became thicker around the dining area, heaped up in small piles around the colonnade, where the Little Alien and Squidge now stopped, open-mouthed, trying to understand the destruction around them.

“I was too slow. By the time I raised the alarm, the first of the insects had already reached the village.”

Xeno walked up beside the Little Alien. He was carrying a medical device, and he looked very sad.

“We hid in the huts at first, but they found ways to get in. Bodger and Cadmus managed to lure a lot of the insects into their huts. Then they burnt them down. Others fought back

with whatever they had to hand. There were too many, of course, and if you get bitten more than a few times, you start to get dizzy.”

Xeno himself looked a little unsteady on his feet, but he continued nevertheless.

“Altus saved us. He remembered that there was a force field around the dining area. It was used in ancient times as a shelter against wild animals. We got everyone inside, and Altus turned the field up to maximum. The insects fried themselves when they tried to get through.”

Xeno stopped, lost in thought, as he raked through one of the piles of insects with his foot. For a while, no one spoke.

“Was anyone ... killed?” said Squidge, asking the question that frightened the Little Alien more than any other. Xeno sighed, still looking at his foot, then answered.

“No,” he said quietly. Then he continued more loudly, “No, we were lucky, but a lot of us have been hurt very badly. It will take a while for us to recover and rebuild. Our work will be much delayed.”

“I’m so sorry,” burst out the Little Alien, and he realised that tears were already rolling down his cheeks, “I’ll do anything to make things right, suffer any punishment-“

“This is beyond punishment,” cut in Xeno sharply, “What difference would punishment make to this?”

He swept his claw around in a gesture that encompassed the whole village. The Little Alien dropped his eyes to the ground, and his shoulders heaved with silent sobs.

“When we punish you, it’s not because it makes us feel better or because we want you to suffer. All we wanted was to help you learn - to help you reach your true potential.”

Xeno put his tentacle around the Little Alien’s shoulder.

“I’m afraid this lesson is so painful that none of us are going to forget it in a hurry.”

“So, no punishment,” said Squidge, who had sat down on a step and was suddenly looking quite exhausted.

“No punishment,” repeated Xeno, “but there will be consequences.”

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Chapter 5: Consequences

The business of clearing up the village took a long time. On the first night, when everyone was still a bit shaken and a bit scared, they moved what beds they could find into the dining area so that everyone could sleep together. There were not enough beds to go round, so the Little Alien and Squidge, and even some of the elders, had to sleep on the hard floor. When everyone was gathered together, Altus activated the force field, and they all went to sleep ... or tried to. Some of the elders snored, some groaned as they turned over in bed and some - the most badly injured - shouted out in pain from time to time. The result was a constant series of noises. When the Little Alien finally got to sleep, it seemed like he was woken only minutes later. Woken by Squidge.

“I need to pee,” said Squidge.

“Well, go and pee then,” replied the Little Alien crossly, “You don’t need my help for that.”

“But I can’t get out. The force field is on.”

In the end, Squidge had to pee in a bucket, and later in the night, the Little Alien found he had to do the same.

The next day, Altus organised everyone into work parties. Cadmus was put in charge of looking after the wounded. With the help of two others, he set up a hospital in the dining area, and together they started nursing the injured back to health. Ponder turned out to be an expert engineer, so he was given the task of inspecting the huts. Small groups set about clearing and repairing the buildings that could be saved. Those that were beyond repair – like the ones that Bodger and Cadmus had set on fire - would later have to be pulled down and rebuilt.

“Please, sir,” said the Little Alien, nervously approaching the chief elder, “What would you like us to do?”

Altus stared at him for a long time before answering. The Little Alien could not remember having spoken to Altus directly before. He shrank under his gaze but resisted the urge to run away. Eventually, the elder spoke:

“Once the huts have been repaired, they will need to be cleaned and tidied. Until then you can busy yourself with clearing the bodies of the insects from around the village.”

The elder paused, and the Little Alien wondered if he was dismissed, but then Altus began speaking again.

“As you are the least useful member of our community, I will put you in charge of keeping everyone else fed and hydrated. Please make sure that meals are prepared and served on time. Also, you should provide plenty of water for the work parties.”

Altus paused again, and this time the Little Alien hoped that he did not have anything else to add. He was relieved when the elder turned away to answer some other question.

Doing everything that had been asked was very hard. At first, it even seemed impossible. No sooner had Squidge and the Little Alien started cleaning away the insect bodies than it was time for a meal. Once the meal was finished and tidied away, there was water to be brought for the work parties. The Little Alien worried that, if they had not cleared the village

by the time the first hut was ready, they would just get further behind and never catch up. He thought about getting the cleaner bugs to help, but it was far too bright for them outside. Besides, he wasn't sure that the elders would approve of him having brought more insects from the city.

In the end, they found a way to get all the work done. Squidge concentrated on sweeping up the bodies, while the Little Alien got the meals ready. During the second night, they built a simple cart for carrying water. It had a big, broad bucket on it and lots of cups on strings. This made it much quicker to get to all the work parties on their hydration rounds and gave them more time for clearing. Above all, they worked really hard. They ate as they went along. They stayed up later than anyone else, and they were up earlier because they had to be ready with breakfast. Within a few days, they were exhausted, but they had succeeded in clearing the village just before the first hut was ready.

That first hut had not been badly damaged, and so it had been quick for the work crews to repair. However, the inside was in quite a state. Some of the furniture had been smashed, almost all the rest showed some damage and over everything was a layer of dirt left by the building work. Squidge and the Little Alien looked at one another in dismay.

"What a mess!" said Squidge, "And what are we supposed to do about the furniture?"

"I suppose we'll have to mend it," replied the Little Alien, "or build some more."

"But I don't know how to build furniture," said Squidge, "Besides, they'll have finished the next hut tomorrow. We'll never keep up."

Neither of them said what they were both thinking - that this was the least damaged of all the huts, and the state of the interiors would get worse and worse with each one that was repaired. The last ones had been completely burnt down, so there would not be a scrap of furniture left. Everything would have to be built new. After staring in silence at the mess for a long time, the Little Alien looked at Squidge.

"I think it's time we got some help," he said.

Because it was already late in the day, the Little Alien had to go and prepare the evening meal. This left Squidge with the job of clearing the house. They had decided that the best thing to do was to move all the furniture outside so that they could see what could be mended and what would have to be replaced. Squidge had just finished sorting through everything when the Little Alien arrived back ... accompanied by an elder.

"You missed dinner," said the Little Alien, handing his friend a small bag, "I brought you something to eat."

Squidge suddenly realised that it was almost dark. He had been concentrating so hard on his work that he had not noticed how hungry he was. Now he felt ravenous, and he reached into the bag to get to the delicious food that the Little Alien had brought for him ... only to stop, embarrassed, when he remembered that there was an elder present.

"This is Ort," said the Little Alien, seeing where Squidge was looking, "He's agreed to help us. He's a carpenter."

"What's a carpenter?" asked Squidge, still with his hand in the bag - unsure if he was allowed to eat or not.

“Someone who makes things out of wood,” said Ort, speaking for the first time. He seemed uncomfortable talking to Squidge, and he quickly turned to the Little Alien as he continued.

“But I must correct you, young one. I am not a carpenter. I merely carry the spirit of a carpenter, and I will not help you. I will do more than that. I will teach you.”

He paused, letting those last four words hang in the air, before finishing:

“Please tell your toy – I mean, your friend – that it may eat. Meanwhile, we will begin.”

Ort talked a lot. He told the Little Alien about different types of wood, where to find them in the forest, how to cut them and how long they needed to dry before you could build furniture with them. He talked about the different tools a carpenter used and how he could join two bits of wood together without using nails or rope. He even began to describe various items of furniture and the designs that were commonly used in the village. The Little Alien tried hard to remember it all, but Squidge just sat and ate his food and then drew patterns in the dust with his toe until the elder finally finished.

“I will continue your lessons tomorrow,” said Ort as he got up to leave, “I will come whenever my other duties allow. In the meantime, you should practise what I have taught you so far.”

The Little Alien was not sure that he had been taught anything, but he politely said thank you and good night. As the elder headed back to the centre of the village, he turned to Squidge.

“I thought he’d never go. Come on. I’ve brought some more help.”

For the first time, Squidge realised that the Little Alien was carrying his bag, and he jumped up, excited at the thought of what was to come. Together they went back into the hut, which was now empty of furniture but still very messy. They closed the shutters to make it as dark as possible. Very gently, the Little Alien placed his bag down on the ground and opened up the flap.

“Hello in there,” he whispered into the bag, “You can come out now if you’d like.”

“But it’s so bright out there,” came the squeaky reply.

“I’m afraid this is as dark as we can make it,” said the Little Alien, “but it is very messy.”

Tempted by the thought of doing some cleaning, a few brave bugs scuttled out of the bag.

“Oooo, yes,” they squealed in delight, “It’s filthy.”

Encouraged by the sounds of their friends tucking into the dirt and debris, the rest of the bugs came out of the bag and started to feast. Watching the little black blobs moving about in the darkness, Squidge realised how late it was and how tired he had become after days of hard work. He very much wanted to sleep, and he took hold of his friend’s tentacle, leading him out of the hut. The Little Alien let himself be guided to the door, then turned around as he remembered something.

“The sun will come up in about seven hours,” he told the bugs, “When it starts to get light, you should go into my bag. I’ll come and pick you up as soon as I can.”

In fact, it was not long after sunrise when the Little Alien returned to collect the bugs. They were all crowded down in the bottom of the bag, huddled in the darkness, except for one. The bravest bug was sitting just at the edge of the patch of full shadow. Every now and again, he would stick a leg out into the light, squeak and bring it back again. What struck the Little Alien the most, however, was the transformation of the hut – it was spotless.

“How busy you’ve been,” said the Little Alien to the bugs, “Thank you so much.”

But all he got in reply was a squeaky “Close the bag. It’s too bright!”, so he flipped the flap over the top and put the bag safely in the darkest part of the hut.

The rest of the day was so busy that it passed in a blur. There were meals to prepare and water to fetch. He was even asked, for a short while, to help with the building work on one of the huts. It was only as he was clearing away the last of the dinner things, that the Little Alien realised he had not seen Squidge all day. He started hunting through the village for his friend, finding him right next to the hut they were working on, but Squidge was not alone. Sitting next to him, on a fine-looking new chair, was Ort. The elder was talking away, lecturing Squidge on some further points of carpentry. Just as last night, Squidge did not look in the least interested. He was shuffling and fidgeting and gazing around. His behaviour was almost rude, but Ort did not seem to mind. The elder stood up when he saw the Little Alien approaching and started to move off, saying it was time for bed. Then he paused, and to the Little Alien’s amazement, he patted Squidge on the back with his tentacle. It was difficult to hold in the question until the elder was out of earshot.

“What was all that about?”

“Oh, he just wanted to continue his lessons,” replied Squidge, “I guess I don’t mind, although he does go on a bit.”

“Well, at least he made us a chair,” said the Little Alien, sitting down and shuffling a little to get comfortable, “and it’s a nice one too.”

“Actually, I made that,” said Squidge.

It was a good job that the Little Alien was already sitting down - otherwise, he would have fallen over in surprise. Squidge saw the look of shock on his friend’s face, so he explained.

He had, he said, started off by fixing the broken furniture from the hut. Some had been beyond repair, but a lot he had been able to patch together using some tools he had found in one of the storehouses. By lunchtime, he had finished, and having grown bored of repomat food, he went into the forest to pick a tongue nut or two. As he was coming back, he stumbled across a store of wood - all stacked neatly but overgrown by the forest. It had obviously been prepared a while ago, for some long-forgotten project, and now it reminded Squidge of Ort’s lesson on carpentry. He finished the tongue nut, carefully selected some of the wood and headed back to the hut. There he had worked all afternoon to make the chair.

“But how did you know what to do? Where to start?” asked the Little Alien.

“I just kind of heard Ort’s voice in my head,” said Squidge, looking a little confused, “and once I started working, a lot of it felt natural – like I was built for it. I suppose I must have been listening to the lesson more carefully than I thought.”

“Well,” said the Little Alien after a long pause, “however you did it, this is a great chair. Do you think you could make other pieces of furniture – like beds and cupboards?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Squidge, “Ort says that having two hands is very useful for carpentry and that I should be able to make all kinds of things. If the next hut’s ready, maybe I can start tomorrow.”

The Little Alien agreed that this would be an excellent idea. For the moment, however, they busied themselves making sure that the current hut was ready for its new occupant. Then they wandered off to bed.

Sure enough, the repairs on the second hut were finished the very next day, and it was handed over to the two friends to make it ready for its new owner. Altus had moved into the first house, so the Little Alien was sure that Bodger would move into the second. Every time he now saw the irritable elder, the Little Alien thought of his achy joints and how much it must be hurting to be sleeping outside, without even a proper bed. That evening, after they had cleared the broken furniture and left the bugs to clean the hut, he asked Squidge if there was anything he could do.

“I’ll speak to Cadmus,” said Squidge, “He knows a lot about healing. I’m sure he’ll be able to help.”

The Little Alien felt strangely uneasy as he drifted off to sleep that night. A couple of days ago, the elders were treating Squidge as no more than a toy. Now his friend seemed to be becoming a part of their community. This was wonderful, obviously, and very useful. Still, the Little Alien could not help but remember when it was just Squidge and him alone, and the elders were like another species. He worried that his friend might get bored of him and that he would be left as an outsider in his own village.

Such thoughts, however, were soon driven from the Little Alien’s head because the huts now started to be repaired at a regular rate. Every day he had to cook, wash and clean for the work parties. Whenever he had time, he went immediately to clear some hut of its old furniture or to some other job of fetching and carrying. Each evening, he would place the cleaner bugs for their nightly work, and each morning, he would collect them. At least *they* were happy with the increased pace. They cheered, in their squeaky voices, at every new, dirty hut – demonstrating their love of filth by leaving only the most spotlessly clean of interiors.

Squidge was busy as well. He had lots of furniture to repair, and an increasing number of replacement items to build. He had made a special rocking chair for Bodger, based on advice from Ort and Cadmus. When the elderly alien rocked, it was designed to massage his limbs and ease his aches and pains. Bodger loved his new chair, and with some of his pain gone, his manner became less and less irritable – although he could still not be called friendly, not by a long way. Nevertheless, everyone noticed his change of mood, and it was not long before they found out the cause. Squidge was bombarded by requests from the elders for different types and styles of furniture. They had ignored such worldly things for so long that they had forgotten the benefits of a good chair or a comfortable bed. Now that they had remembered, Squidge was kept working day and night to keep up with demand. The Little Alien helped out when he could - particularly when Squidge said he had a ‘three-handed task’ - but it was not often and never for long.

There was, however, one project that the Little Alien made time for. He had promised the bugs a nice, dark house, and now he asked Squidge to make it for him. They worked together on the plans, ensuring that there were no gaps where light could get in and designing

a clever door mechanism that the bugs would be able to work themselves. There was one more feature that was important, which had Squidge confused at first.

“Of course, the house needs to be as light as possible,” announced the Little Alien when the plans were almost completed.

Squidge looked up from where he was drawing in the dust – he drew all his plans in the dirt, and even though they frequently got blown away by the wind, he always remembered them precisely. For a second, he seemed to be about to throw down his stick and stomp off.

“We’ve spent all this time making sure it was dark,” he spluttered, “and now you want it light!”

“Yes, but light as in ...” the Little Alien struggled to find the right word but nothing came to mind. He tried another approach: “We might have to pick it up and carry it with us. It needs to be light.”

“Oh, un-heavy,” said Squidge, “Why didn’t you say so.”

He turned back to his design, but almost immediately, he was overcome with giggles. The Little Alien looked at the lines on the ground and saw that the bug house was getting some windows – complete with elegant, bug-sized curtains. Soon they were both laughing helplessly until Squidge suddenly stopped and asked:

“But where do you think we’ll need to take them?”

“I don’t know,” replied the Little Alien, “Somewhere. You never know when you’re going to have an adventure.”

Given that it was both light and dark, the bugs were overjoyed with their new home. Each evening, it would be deposited in a newly repaired hut. Each morning, the Little Alien would come back to find everything spotless - the sounds of satisfied snores drifting up from the bug house like the purring of some small and happy animal.

Then, very suddenly, it was all over. The last of the huts was finished – the one that would be home for the Little Alien and Squidge. After that, it was as if nothing had ever happened. The elders went back to their same, boring way of life, and once more, the two friends found themselves almost completely ignored. They too picked up where they had left off - exploring, playing and trying, mostly successfully, to stay out of trouble. True, Squidge was building lots of stuff out of wood – some useful and some decorative – but largely the world had returned to its normal rhythm. It might have stayed like this forever if it hadn’t have been for the letter.

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Chapter 6: The Council of Elders

The letter was waiting, one evening, when the Little Alien arrived back at the hut. There was no envelope, just a folded piece of paper. It had something written on the outside, maybe a name, but the Little Alien could not tell for sure because he couldn't read. Rather than open the letter there and then, the Little Alien decided he would take it with him to dinner. He asked Xeno what it said on the front.

"Why, that's your name of course," replied the elder, looking at him with a certain curiosity.

The Little Alien stared and stared at the squiggles on the paper. He had never seen his name written down before. He was about to ask Xeno to read it to him, but the elder spoke first.

"Are you telling me that you can't read?" asked Xeno, "How old are you?"

"I'm fifteen years," replied the Little Alien, going slightly red, "and no one's ever taught me to read."

"Dear me, young one," said Xeno, "If you wait to be taught everything, then you'll not learn very much around here."

The elder saw the hot look of shame in the Little Alien's eyes, and he relented.

"Would you like me to read this to you?" he asked, waving the letter in his hand.

The Little Alien nodded "yes, please", so Xeno started to read the single page of writing, which began in a blunt fashion, as follows:

As you are the youngest of the community, you have, until today, been given the freedom to behave almost entirely as you would wish. Recently, however, you have shown, through your actions, that you are ready to become an adult and to join the ranks of the elders – the Little Alien gasped at this point, but Xeno continued regardless – Tomorrow you are to report to The Council of Elders, where you will receive your instructions.

"Will I really become an elder tomorrow?" exploded the Little Alien, in utter horror.

To his surprise, Xeno laughed.

"Goodness, no. I don't think there's ever been an elder with less than a hundred years in their lifeline. Tomorrow is the first small step of a long journey," Xeno watched some of the colour return to the Little Alien's face before continuing, "but tomorrow will be a very special day. The Council has not met for a thousand years – I remember it well because that was when I became an elder. Your life, like mine, will change forever, whether you want it to or not."

The Little Alien sat in silence for the rest of the meal. He was shocked by the letter, and he was shocked to discover that Xeno was over a thousand years old. He was so shocked that he had nothing to say when it was his turn to speak after dinner. It was only as everyone was drifting away from the table that he stopped Xeno to ask the question that had been going round in his head for the whole meal.

"Is this my punishment," he blurted out, "for creating the biting insects – for bringing destruction on the village?"

Xeno looked at him for a long time before answering.

“I told you that there would be no punishment but that there would be consequences. You behaved like an elder when we were rebuilding the village. You worked to the full extent of your ability and to the full limit of your energy. In the darkest of times, you found ways to ease the suffering of others,” Xeno wagged his claw as the Little Alien started to protest, “Yes, we know that it was your idea to make a special chair for Bodger, even if it was your toy – sorry, your friend – who did the carpentry.”

The Little Alien now stood with mouth open in amazement as Xeno continued.

“We know that you’ve been exploring on the inside, so you should understand how powerful that can be – and you have only scratched the surface. Imagine where I can go after a thousand years of practice. Imagine whose eyes I might look through.”

Xeno paused and laid his tentacle gently over the Little Alien’s head. For a split second, he found himself staring up at Xeno from amongst the dust at their feet. When he came back to himself, he looked down and saw an ant crawling along the ground. He was sure that the ant was looking up at him and, even more strangely, that it was looking at him with a kind of understanding in its eyes.

“Did you ... did I ...?” he spluttered.

“Yes, we did,” Xeno smiled, “My way of showing you that there’s a lot more you can learn about your own abilities.”

The elder’s face darkened as he continued.

“I only worry that too much will be asked of you too soon. I have had so many, many years – and in solitude and peace – to explore the limits of my mind. You will not have the same luxury.”

It was only when the Little Alien got back to his hut, still wondering about Xeno’s words, that he realised he had not asked where, or at what time, the Council of Elders would take place. By then, however, he was too tired to worry about it. He tumbled into bed, and despite Squidge’s snoring, he had soon fallen into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The next morning, the Little Alien hurried to breakfast. He was, in equal parts, nervous about his invitation and impatient for it to be over. He fired question after question at Xeno as they ate, but the elder answered only two of them. He said that the meeting would take place after breakfast and that it would be held in the Council Hall.

“But we haven’t got a Council Hall,” protested the Little Alien.

In reply, Xeno simply said that he must try and calm his mind so as to be ready for the meeting. They spent the rest of the meal in silence. Xeno waited while the Little Alien cleared the table, before leading him to a large open space on one side of the village. Waiting there were the three oldest elders – Bodger and Cadmus, with Altus standing in-between them.

“I still don’t understand,” hissed the Little Alien as he was brought to a halt a little way in front of the solemn trio, “Where’s the Council Hall?”

Xeno said nothing, but just as the day before, he laid his tentacle on the Little Alien’s head. Gradually the scene changed. It was as if the hall was growing around them – growing out of thin air. When it was finished, high vaulted ceilings towered above them, and rose-

flecked sunlight streamed in through hidden windows. Colourful pictures covered the walls, showing scenes of noble and daring deeds. Most surprising of all, the three senior elders were now clothed in ornate robes of silver and gold. They looked down at the Little Alien with expressions that were serious but not unkind. They looked at him like this for such a long time that he began to fidget, desperately wanting this to be over, but not knowing what was expected of him. He had just decided that they must be waiting for him to break the silence when Altus spoke.

“Our race was born,” began the elder, “when the universe was young, but the universe is big, and we are small. So it is still young, and we are now very old. Our civilisation has grown and flowered, and now it has disappeared. We have done all our exploring and all our inventing and, yes, even all our playing. However, we few who remain are not unhappy because we have discovered how to explore on the inside – and the inside is far bigger than the outside if you look at it closely enough.”

The Little Alien was not at all sure about this last statement, but then he looked around at the magnificent Council Hall, which had so recently appeared out of thin air, and he decided that there might be more things left for him to discover about the inside. Things he had not even dreamt of yet.

“Our exploration of the inside has shown that there is even more,” continued Altus, “There is another place we can go. Somewhere outside this universe. Somewhere that is more vast than any of us can yet imagine. We are impatient to go there so that we can start anew ... maybe even learn to play again.”

“Why don’t you play here?” burst out the Little Alien, “I play lots. I could show you.”

The three elders looked rather sad as the Little Alien spoke these words, and they were silent for a while. In the end, it was Cadmus who answered the Little Alien’s question.

“There can be no play for us here, where we witnessed the destruction of our civilisation, there is only a terrible and sacred duty. Soon, we will show you what this place really is, just as we have shown you this Council Hall. Then, I’m afraid, there will be no play for you either.”

Questions crowded into the Little Alien’s mind when he heard these words, but just when he had worked out what to ask first, Altus started speaking.

“Before we can leave on our long-awaited journey,” he said, “there are two tasks to complete – two conditions to be met. Firstly, we must do our duty to the universe. The seed of our civilisation was planted here, on this planet, by ancient and unseen hands. Now we, in our turn, must plant the seed of those who are to follow. We cannot leave the universe desolate and lonely. Even to think of this would forever block our way forward.”

“So where’s the seed?” said the Little Alien, growing impatient with all this talking, “Let’s plant it now. Then we can watch it grow.”

Bodger made a sort of coughing noise at this, which the Little Alien thought later might have been a chuckle. He quickly recovered himself and took his turn in the conversation.

“No, no, young one,” he said, “The seed is not here. It is too large. And we could not plant it here. This planet is cursed.”

The Little Alien felt Xeno’s tentacle tense on his head, and he saw Cadmus glance in shock at his fellow elder.

“Don’t look at me like that, he will see the truth soon, and with his own eyes. We cannot protect him any longer.”

“In any case,” said Altus, “this planet is far too close to the galactic centre. The youngster will have to travel almost to the rim before he finds a suitable world for seeding.”

“Excuse me,” the Little Alien interrupted again, “but do you mean that I’m to plant this seed on another world. That I’m to go into space?”

He was so excited by the thought of this that he was almost shaking. He might even get to meet an outlander, and in his imagination, he was already reaching out to touch-

“-essential for the second condition, that we must all make this journey together. Even you, young one.”

Altus’s words brought the Little Alien back to the present. He felt his excitement draining away, to be replaced by a feeling of nervousness.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, “which journey?”

“Why, the journey beyond the universe, of course,” said Altus, smiling indulgently, “We must all go together. Otherwise it will be utterly impossible.”

The Little Alien’s heart sank. He was so upset that he could not control himself.

“But I don’t want to go anywhere. I haven’t finished what I want to do here yet. There’s the city to explore, and the carpetweed swamp, and the Garrick Mountains to climb, and ...,” the Little Alien’s voice trailed off and his shoulders sagged as he finished in a very quiet voice, “... and this is my home.”

To his surprise, the elders were not angry at his outburst. Altus walked forward, took him gently by the hand and bent down to speak to him face to face.

“I am so sorry, but there is something you must see. It will be upsetting for you – that cannot be helped – so the sooner it is done, the better it will be in the end.”

Leaving these ominous words hanging in the air, Altus started to lead the Little Alien forward. As soon as Xeno’s tentacle left his head, the vision of the Council Hall dissolved, and they were back in the village. It was exactly as before, but now the Little Alien felt uneasy – like he was being watched. Indeed as Altus led him on, other elders began to emerge from among the huts to follow them. The Little Alien was somehow comforted to see that Squidge was there, although his friend held back, made nervous by the feeling of ceremony. It was a short procession, and yet it created the impression that something of great importance was going to happen. When they stopped at the edge of the village, facing the forest, the Little Alien found that he was clutching Altus’s hand more tightly than was polite. The eldest elder put a reassuring tentacle around his shoulder, and after taking a couple of deep breaths, the Little Alien relaxed his grip.

“Before we begin,” said Altus, ignoring the small crowd of onlookers and concentrating only on the Little Alien, “I want you to know that you are completely safe. Whatever happens today will not harm you. I will not allow it. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” replied the Little Alien, staring at the greens and browns of the forest, and wondering what could possibly threaten him in such a familiar place.

“Do you believe me?” asked Altus, now staring intently at the youngster by his side.

“Yes,” replied the Little Alien, more hesitantly, but still firmly enough to coax a grunt of satisfaction from the elder.

“Very well,” said Altus, “What do you see before you?”

“Trees, leaves, branches ... the forest,” replied the Little Alien, confused.

“Lies!”

This one word was said with such force that it was almost a shout.

“What you see is real enough, but it is not the truth. I shall show you the way. I shall show you how to find the truth.”

Altus paused slightly, seeming to need to calm himself before continuing.

“In a moment I will ask you to go to your gateway. I know that you have been there at least once. Each time you visit, the transit will be easier than the last, but you should not feel rushed – we have all the time in the world. When you get to your gateway, you will need to look for a particular doorway.”

“What will it look like? Where will it be?” asked the Little Alien.

“That I cannot say,” answered Altus, “One’s gateway is a very private place. It is different for everyone. What I can tell you, with absolute certainty, is that it will be the oldest of all the doorways and that you will know it when you see it.”

The Little Alien looked wide-eyed at the elder. He suddenly felt very helpless but also very determined.

“When you are ready,” said Altus, “you should go to your gateway.”

It was very difficult to find the stillness he needed, now he knew that everyone was watching and waiting. The Little Alien had to begin again several times, but eventually, he heard the buzz of the fireflies and felt the light breeze on his face. He opened his eyes to find himself standing in the moonlit garden, and he felt the familiar calm wash over his mind. His confidence was increased. Now, he thought, it was just a matter of finding the right door.

There were so many, standing at all angles and stretching out into the darkness on all sides. Some were old, and some were new. Some he now recognised – he passed close by the door to the utility room in the abandoned factory, for example – but most were a complete mystery. How he would be able to tell which was the oldest door was beyond him, but as the Little Alien moved through the garden, he noticed that the fireflies did not always follow him. Once or twice he tried to keep going without them. Soon, however, the gloom would grow too thick, and he was forced to retrace his steps or risk taking a tumble in the darkness.

So, the Little Alien ended up going only where the fireflies would follow, and it seemed like they had a particular destination in mind because he found himself guided in one direction. It was not long before he felt a little tingle in his tummy, which grew as he walked until it had become recognisable as a nervous sort of tingle. Then it grew some more until it was a scared sort of a tingle ... and that was when he saw the arch. Looking as if it had been cut out of the side of a cliff, using only the most basic of tools, the arch stood – like all the other doorways – in the middle of a patch of short grass. How it managed to stand without toppling over was a mystery, and the Little Alien was careful not to get too close as he walked, just once, around it. Now he was not just nervous or scared but really frightened. There was no reason to be, but it was as if the arch was reaching out and planting the feeling

deep down inside of him – planting it where he could not reach to get it out. He peered through the arch, to see what dangers it might contain, but he just saw the garden that lay on the other side. Knowing that he would have to actually step through, the Little Alien summoned all his courage ... but it wasn't enough. Now he was so frightened that he felt rooted to the spot, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. Then he closed his eyes, and it was as if Altus's words came echoing through the garden:

“I won't let any harm come to you. Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” whispered the Little Alien, then more loudly, “Yes, I believe you.”

And he took a step forward, disappearing through the arch.

“Ah, young one, you made it,” said a familiar voice.

The Little Alien looked up in shock, to find that he was still standing next to Altus, still holding his hand – exactly as he had been.

“It didn't work,” he said, staring grumpily at his feet, “I didn't go anywhere, just back here.”

He felt certain that he had failed the test – that his big day had come to nothing.

“Not every doorway takes you to a memory. Some simply allow you to see the world in a different way,” said Altus, “Look at the forest.”

The Little Alien slowly raised his head and choked back a cry of fear. Where the edge of the forest should have been, there was nothing but a desolate wasteland. The earth was scorched and blackened, and not a scrap of vegetation grew. Here and there lay ugly boulders, none of them standing higher than the Little Alien's waist but, nonetheless, managing to cast long shadows on the ground. This broken land stretched to the left and right, surrounding the village. It stretched about a stone's throw from where they stood, where it ended in a wall. This was not a normal wall but a wall of fire, burning with silent red and black flames that reached almost to the height of a tongue tree and blocked sight of anything beyond. So, it seemed that the village was surrounded twice, first by a circle of wasteland and then by a circle of fire. Neither of these things, shocking though they were, had caused the Little Alien to cry out in fear. This reaction had been caused by his sight of the shadowy figures that moved across the wasteland. They were everywhere, mostly wandering aimlessly over the scorched earth, but a few now stopping to stare at the Little Alien. He, in turn, stared back, realising that the figures looked like elders, but with no colour to them – their features visible only as slightly darker patches on their heads.

“What ... how?”

The Little Alien was so overwhelmed by what he saw that he could not even think of a question to ask. Fortunately, Altus seemed to understand.

“What you see is no more or less real than the forest,” he explained, “They are both different layers of reality that sit on top of one another and make up the world we know. We are fortunate that we can move between these layers – you can go back whenever you please by going through the same door.”

“Cave,” interrupted the Little Alien, “It was like the entrance to a cave.”

Altus simply nodded in response to this, and he suddenly looked weary and beckoned to Xeno, asking him to continue the instruction.

“You will have many questions,” began Xeno, “and I will do my best to answer as many as possible now. To start with, let me explain more about your mission. I know it is not the first question you would ask, but it is the first thing that you need to know.”

The Little Alien’s gaze was drawn to one of the shadow creatures. He was desperate to know more about them – were they dangerous, for example – but something about Xeno’s manner stopped him from interrupting.

“You are to plant the seed of a new civilisation – Altus has already made this clear – but have you thought what this will involve?” continued the elder, “The seed must be located and loaded aboard a spaceship. As you can see,” Xeno gestured around the village, “we don’t have one of those, so I suspect that you will have to build one. Then there will be a long journey out to the galactic rim, and there may be many difficulties and dangers to overcome on the way. All in all, you are facing a real challenge, and we cannot help you.”

“Why not? Why can’t you help?” asked the Little Alien, forgetting that he was meant to be being patient.

“You see the fire?”

The Little Alien nodded.

“As you get older, the fire affects you more and more, regardless of which layer you are in,” explained Xeno, “Altus can barely go two steps over the boundary before he is forced back by the pain. Of all of us, I can go furthest, but even I couldn’t get as far as the city – maybe not even halfway.”

“I can’t do it alone,” wailed the Little Alien, “I don’t know anything about building spaceships. You’ve given me an impossible task.”

“Now, now,” said Xeno, patting him on the shoulder, “You’ll have to have more faith in yourself than that if you’re going to overcome the challenges ahead. Besides,” he winked, “I didn’t say that you wouldn’t have help, I just said that *we* couldn’t help you. Now, I’m really sorry about this, but it’s time for you to say hello to the shades.”

To the Little Alien’s enormous surprise, Xeno gave him a hefty shove that sent him staggering across into the wasteland. He took a couple of quick steps to regain his balance, but his foot caught on a rock, and he fell to his hands and knees, sending small clouds of dust into the air. At first, he felt angry at being shoved. Then he realised that, inches from his nose, was a pair of colourless feet. Anger was replaced by terror as the Little Alien looked up into the face of a shade.

The Little Alien stared up at the ghostly figure, wanting to run but finding that he was rooted to the spot by fear. The thing stared back down at him with eyes like pools of oil. Its mouth was tightly closed and looked like a ragged cut in a piece of dirty cloth. It blinked, once ... twice, then began to open its mouth, revealing an inky cave with no lips or teeth or tongue. Now panic gave the Little Alien the strength to move, and he dived back towards the village, wanting to be away from the terrible things in the wasteland. He reached the boundary in two long strides, but then it was as if he hit a wall. Once again, he was sent sprawling to the ground.

“Well, youngster, you’ve come to visit us at last,” said a voice by his side, and he looked up to see the shadow creature standing beside him, “How old are you now – twenty? We always did think you were a bit slow.”

"I'm only fifteen," said the Little Alien, forgetting some of his fear in the face of this insult.

"Oh, younger than we thought."

The horrid mouth opened and closed randomly as the thing talked, as if it had nothing to do with the words being spoken.

"I suppose that's why you enjoy scrabbling in the dirt so much. I would help you up, but I've got no body, you see?"

"What are you?" asked the Little Alien, getting carefully back to his feet.

"Hmph!" the thing sighed, seeming disappointed by the question, "Some call us shades, or shadows, or spirits, but really we are the essence of long-dead elders. I suppose that 'essences' is not a very good name – too much sibilance – so you may refer to us as spirits.

"Are you dead then?" asked the Little Alien, now not really feeling afraid at all - and making a mental note to ask later what 'sibilance' meant.

"A very difficult question to answer," the thing – the spirit – replied, "I don't feel dead, and here we are talking, but I'm certainly not alive in the way you are. I don't have a body for a start, and I cannot move outside this small circle of wasteland. Then again, I've never been dead, so I don't know what it's like or how it might be different from what I am now. Let's just say, in my own humble opinion, I am somewhere in-between being fully alive and fully dead."

"So, who are you ... or who were you, and how did you come to be trapped here, like this," the Little Alien waved his tentacle, indicating the colourless shadow that served as the spirit's body.

"You may call me The Historian," said the spirit, "That is what I was when I was fully alive, and that is what I am now. I study, remember and retell history. That is why you have been sent-"

"Pushed," muttered the Little Alien under his breath.

"-to me first. So that I can tell you the history of the place you know as Ringwood Village."

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Chapter 7: The Historian's Tale

The Historian led the Little Alien over to a smooth, low boulder and indicated that he should sit down. It was a long story, he said, and would be the first of many that would be told today, so it would be best to be comfortable for the telling. He then began to talk of a time when the whole planet was filled with elders and youngsters, and the story went like this ...

It was not so long ago, the Historian said, that this planet was the centre of a vast galactic empire. After millions of years of development and exploration, their species was enjoying a golden age – an age in which they had spread out across the galaxy and established a grand civilisation. As individuals, they lived for many thousands of years, and while this had slowed things down earlier in their evolution, it was now proving to be a great benefit. In a lifetime that long, it was possible to gather a lot of knowledge and to think of very long-term goals. So, the technology of that day was very advanced, and the projects that were undertaken were colossal in their vision. They built magnificent cities, amazing spaceships, beautiful parks and all kinds of incredible resorts for holidays and leisure. They controlled nature. They conquered space. There was no hunger or disease – even death was rare. In short, people began to believe that their civilisation was invincible, supreme – almost godlike.

Then, one day just like any other, a message was received from one of the far-off outposts. It reported a disaster, unbelievable numbers of casualties and something about a fire. Of course, it was dismissed as nonsense – a prank, perhaps – except that, after this, the outpost went dark. No further communications were received, and all attempts to re-establish contact were unsuccessful. A fleet of ships was despatched to investigate, but it never arrived. Events were now moving too quickly, racing ahead of even the fastest of their technologies. Within days, similar messages were received from dozens of other planets. It seemed as if the whole species was being systematically exterminated by an enemy that could not be seen and had never even been heard of before. Strangely there was no panic. The situation was just too terrible - the danger so great that it could not really be understood. Probably, people just didn't want to believe what was happening. Life went on as normal, and the Historian was no different. He had planned a holiday in a quiet resort called Ringwood Village. He was certainly not going to cancel this well-earned break, despite the now continuous news reports of destruction. So, he packed his bags and left the city in the expectation of returning within a few days.

"This used to be a holiday resort?" interrupted the Little Alien, wondering why anyone would come here if they lived in that amazing city. After all, he took every opportunity to do the opposite.

"Yes, it was very popular at the time. The fashion was to get close to nature, and this was seen as the perfect spot. In fact, when I arrived, the King himself was in residence."

The Historian did not have long to enjoy his holiday. On the second day, there was a nervous buzz around the village as people shared the news of fires spreading across the planet, destroying everything in their path. The forest, however, seemed as peaceful as ever, so the Historian decided to continue with his plans to go bird watching. Along with most of the other residents, he headed out of the village equipped for a day in the great outdoors. The morning passed uneventfully, except that the Historian saw many beautiful birds and made lots of notes in his book about them. Only at midday, when he was sitting to have his lunch, did he hear the first cries of panic. It was difficult to tell which direction the noise was

coming from as the tall trees blocked his view and bounced the sound around. So, for a while, he simply stood where he was, trying to decide whether to run and help or just to try and escape. Soon the decision was made for him. Another person came running into the small clearing where the Historian was standing.

“I heard screams,” said the newcomer, “Are you hurt?”

“Not me,” replied the Historian, and he was about to continue when something caught his eye. Advancing through the forest was a wall of fire. It moved quickly and in complete silence, and with his back turned, the newcomer had no idea it was there. The Historian called out a warning, and the man turned to look, but he seemed more fascinated by the flames than afraid of them. He watched as they advanced, seeming to realise only at the last minute that there might be danger. By the time he had made the decision to run, it was too late. The fire caught him, and for a second, it seemed as if he was frozen – a look of surprise on his face. Then his skin blackened, and his body exploded into a cloud of dust that was quickly sucked back into the flames. The Historian did not delay any longer. He turned and ran as fast as he could back towards the village, hoping to find some shelter there. As he ran, he became aware that there were others in the forest, also heading towards the village, but all he could think about was his own dash for safety.

Suddenly, the Historian burst out into the open and saw the village ahead. He also saw a soldier trying to plant something in the ground - something that looked like a short staff. It would not stay standing, so the soldier had to hold it with his claw, whilst punching buttons on a control box with his hand. Glancing at this awkward scene, the Historian knew that he should stop and help, but instead he rushed past, consumed with the thought of reaching the village. He was almost there when he heard a cry of triumph from behind and saw the unmistakable shimmer of a force-wall rising between him and his goal. With a final effort, he found a little more speed and rushed forward, but the force-wall was completed long before he reached it. Even as the Historian rebounded from this new barrier, he realised that his life was over. All around there were other visitors who had been trapped outside the ring of safety. Some were shouting, some were banging on the wall and some were weeping. It was quite a crowd and quite a noise, but everyone became quiet as the fire approached. Although most people were huddled at the wall – as far from the flames as possible – the soldier was stood further forward. He had drawn his gun and was pointing it at the fire. It was a brave thing to do, and that small show of strength had a calming effect on those nearest, but ultimately, it was a futile gesture. It was also unnecessary, because the flames stopped.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. There was even some ragged cheering. The soldier, however, did not relax. It was as if he knew that the danger had not yet passed, and anyone looking closely would have seen that he was now holding his gun so tightly that it shook in his hand. It was a strange scene, this one man as tense as a coiled spring while the civilians were beginning to look around, wondering what would happen next, but it was the eye of the storm, and it lasted only seconds. A sharp crackling sound hushed the crowd, and arcs of electricity began to writhe across the face of the flames. They grew bigger and moved faster until they seemed to get bored with sticking to the wall of fire and shot out into the open ground. A thousand bolts of lightning, striking again and again at everyone and everything in sight. The Historian felt himself hit from several directions at once. There was nothing he could do to protect himself – no cover and no defence could stop this new onslaught. Strangely, however, there was no pain, even though he could feel his skin, scales, flesh and bone being burnt to dust, as a million volts of electricity coursed through his body.

When the barrage stopped, the Historian found that he was still standing just where he had been. He still felt the same. It was everything else that had changed. He now stood at the edge of a wasteland. The earth had been cleared of grass and was scorched black. No plants of any kind were visible, and worst of all, wherever he looked were sinister, shadowy creatures. He turned to flee and found that the force-wall had gone. The village seemed intact, and there were even a few people wandering among the huts, seemingly unharmed. The Historian, wanting nothing more than to be away from the shadow creatures and back with his own kind, went to step across the boundary of the wasteland and onto the green grass of the village, but he could not. Something blocked his way. When he put up his hand to push against this invisible barrier, he had another shock. It was no longer the hand that he remembered, but a colourless thing, attached to a colourless arm and a colourless body. He might have screamed, there was so much screaming just then that it was hard to tell. What he knew for sure was that he, and everyone else in that wasteland, was now nothing more than a spirit.

“So you’ve been trapped here, in this wasteland, ever since?” asked the Little Alien.

The Historian nodded, and then the Little Alien thought of something else.

“Am I trapped here now?”

“Goodness no,” said the Historian, “You have travelled through this area many times, just not in this layer. Anytime you want to leave, you only have to go back to the other layer and you will be in the forest. Then you can go wherever you would like.”

“Can’t you go to the other layer and escape?” asked the Little Alien.

“No. For some reason, none of us can explore on the inside,” said the Historian, “We are trapped here. There is no way through the barrier to the village, and ... the alternative.”

The Little Alien followed the Historian’s gaze to the wall of flame, and he shuddered.

“Many have walked into the flames, and none have returned,” finished the Historian.

“So you’re doomed. Trapped here forever,” cried the Little Alien, suddenly feeling very sorry for the shadowy figures all around him.

To his surprise, the Historian laughed.

“Trapped, yes. Doomed, no,” he said.

Then he looked very intently at the Little Alien and continued.

“You came here for help,” he said, “Well, look around you at these spirits. Think what knowledge and skills they possess. Imagine how useful it would be on your mission to have the help of a doctor, or an engineer, or a stellar cartographer.”

“A what?” interrupted the Little Alien, not sure he was following.

“You’ve never heard of a stellar cartographer?” said the Historian.

The Little Alien shook his head.

“It is someone who makes maps of outer space – literally a mapper of stars. You do realise that you’ll need a map to find where you’re going?”

The Little Alien shrugged. He had never had a map when he was exploring before, but he was too polite to disagree. Besides, he wanted to hear what the Historian would say next. He was not disappointed.

“What if I told you that you could take some of these spirits with you to act as your counsellors and teachers – to give you guidance when you needed it most.”

As he thought about this, the Little Alien let his gaze wander across the wasteland. There were about a hundred shadowy figures that he could see, standing and staring or ambling around. He reckoned he could see about a quarter of the wasteland from where he was, so there must be something like four hundred spirits in total. This was more than ten times the population of the Village – which was the only world he had ever known. Gradually he felt a tingle of excitement run up his spine. There must be someone here who knew how to build a spaceship. Suspecting that this was too good to be true, the Little Alien spotted a problem.

“But you said that spirits couldn’t leave the wasteland. How can any of them come with me?”

“We spirits cannot leave on our own, but we can leave as passengers,” explained the Historian, “You can carry us with you in your mind. The number you can carry depends on how well developed your mind is – how well disciplined. Altus is able to carry more than twenty spirits. I should think you’ll be able to manage two or three.”

“How does it work?” asked the Little Alien.

“Well,” began the Historian, “it works because of a process called transanimation. You see the-”

“BORING!” shouted a voice from nearby. The Little Alien looked down to see that a head had appeared on the boulder beside him.

“You don’t want to waste time listening to this old windbag giving you a boring science lecture,” said the head, “and to be brutally honest, that was a rubbish question to ask. A better question would be ‘how do I decide who to take’, or should that be ‘whom to take’ – I always get that one wrong.”

The Little Alien opened his mouth to ask a question but stopped when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked round to see a headless body standing behind him. The body waved to the Little Alien and then waved to the head.

“Body!” said the head, “So you found me at last. How good to see you. I always said that we should get together some time.”

Now the body walked around the boulder and went to pick up the head. The first time it missed, so the head gave it some instructions – up a bit, left a bit. The next time, the body grabbed it successfully and went to set it back in its rightful place, but it got the head upside down; then back to front. All the time the head kept up a steady stream of instructions, insults and comments. The Little Alien watched this performance with a feeling of wonder and delight. The Historian was less pleased, tapping his foot, tutting and muttering “Really! Must we have this pantomime every single time.” Finally, the head was fitted back, properly and securely, on the body.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said the reassembled spirit, as if seeing the Little Alien for the first time, “Where are my manners,” and he performed a deep bow, during which his head fell off

again and had to be retrieved – much to the amusement of the Little Alien and the disgust of the Historian.

“My name ... my name is not important,” continued the spirit, “but you, my friend – and I can tell already that we will be friends – you may call me the Poet.”

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## Chapter 8: The Poet's Tale

The Poet was as hideous and poorly formed as all the other shadow creatures, and yet the Little Alien could have sworn that he saw a glint in his pitch black eyes and a grin in the inky cave of his mouth.

"Can I really only take two or three spirits with me?" asked the Little Alien, and the Poet's grin grew broader.

"I'm afraid that my dead dull friend is right," said the Poet, "Everyone has been limited to this number at first ... even Altus."

He stressed these last two words, glaring at the Historian.

"It is like anything else. You get better with dedication, application and exercise."

"Okay," said the Little Alien, "so how do I learn to take more?"

The Poet laughed.

"They were also in a terrible rush, to begin with, every single one of them," he swept his claw in the direction of the village, "but they soon learnt that this takes time. Yet you, my dear friend, do not have the luxury of time."

"So how am I to choose so few from so many?" asked the Little Alien, gazing again around the wasteland, "and how will I find out about all these people?"

"That is why I am here. Your humble servant."

Now the Poet curtsied, rather than bowed, carefully holding his head in place.

"The villagers - your elders - found out long ago that all the spirits in the wasteland are desperate to get out. Yes, they are good people at heart ... mostly, but who wouldn't exaggerate their usefulness to escape from an eternity as a shadow. In the early days, the elders snatched up spirits up as quick as you like, in response to their inflated claims. More than once they were even duped by spirits claiming to have the 'cure for the fire'. They soon discovered that many of these claims were lies, or at best only partially true. By then, of course, it was too late."

"What do you mean?" interrupted the Little Alien, slowly drawing away from both the Poet and the Historian.

"My dear boy," said the Poet, sensing his alarm, "we're not going to hurt you, but once you've taken up a spirit then they are with you forever. It is important to choose wisely, which is why it's a good job that you have me to guide you."

"But you can't help me," blurted out the Little Alien, "I need to build a spaceship, find a planet, plant a seed and start a new civilisation. How's poetry going to help me with that?"

"Exactly what everyone else has said to begin with," the Poet admitted with obvious pride in his voice, "but then, in the end, they all begged me to join them. Of course, I said no. I am a martyr to my art."

"Effluent, lies and ... and ...,"

The Historian had clearly reached the point where his anger was greater than his vocabulary.

“What annoys Mr Droopy Draws here,” said the Poet, “is that the elders have decided that I am incorruptible and, therefore, the perfect guide for those seeking spirit advisors.”

By now, the Little Alien had stopped being scared, and he had stopped being amused, and he had almost stopped being confused. Actually, he was still very confused, but he was damned if he was going to let it show. Nevertheless, there was one question he had to ask:

“You say that you’re incorruptible, but what does that even mean?”

The effect of this question on the Poet was electrifying. He stood with his feet placed far apart and his hands on his hips. Then he spoke, as if to an invisible audience:

“How can one mean what one says if one does not say what one means, and how can one say what one means without understanding the basic tools? Words are my tools, and I know them as well as any carpenter knows his chisels.”

Now he relaxed his pose and looked down at the Little Alien.

“Incorruptible means that I cannot be tempted into doing something I should not. In my case, it means that you can trust me to help you find the best spirits to take on your journey.”

“How do I know that’s true?” asked the Little Alien, narrowing his eyes, “How do I know you’re even a poet?”

The Poet replied with no hesitation.

*“To save some time, I’ll tell my story in rhyme.  
Then I’ll further explain, so no doubt will remain.*

*“There once was an elderly poet,  
Who threw down his pen and cried ‘blow it!’  
Those scientists are mean,  
They’re stealing my scene,  
Now they’ve gone and invented a rhyming machine.*

*“It writes very fine verse,  
And I’ll tell you what’s worse,  
It won’t be a drain on anyone’s purse.*

*“It doesn’t need drink, and it doesn’t need food,  
It doesn’t need clothes – it goes round in the nude,  
And while I’m inspired by my favourite place,  
It churns out poems in the vacuum of space.*

*“But this thing had no soul,  
Its emotions it stole,  
From its data-banks crammed with the poems of old.*

*“So when the wind blew, with its fiery breath,  
the King came to me to make noble his death,  
But my confidence failed - I felt second rate,  
My courage returned ... just slightly too late.*



*"Now here I remain,  
Having cheated the flame,  
My body is gone, and I'm technically dead.  
I now don't need wine, and I now don't need bread.  
How like the machine I became."*

Having finished his recitation, the Poet rocked back on his heels as if in deep thought. The Little Alien wasn't sure how, or if, he was going to continue, but suddenly the story began in prose ...

Back in the old days, you got a lot of respect for being a poet. If you were a good one, of course, and your poems were well known. People – important people – would queue up to have poems written for them or, even better, about them. The Poet was in great demand, and he had lots of friends who were also poets - or who wanted to be. They had formed a little club, and they gathered together to write poems, discuss styles or just to talk about how brilliant it was to be a poet. How they laughed when the first rhymebots appeared, promising instant poems for every occasion. They giggled at the machines' clumsy use of meter and their shallow imagery. A few years later, there was not so much laughter. The bots had got better – a lot better – and fewer people wanted poetry written by real people. A few years after that, the poets club started to fall apart. They started drifting away, finding different and more fashionable things to do with their time. Finally, there was only the Poet left. He loved poetry so much that he continued to write poems, even though no one wanted to read them.

Stuck on his own, however, his thoughts turned in odd directions. Without friends, and isolated as he was, he became a little paranoid. In particular, he became worried that his poems might be used to help the rhymebots. He knew that they had become so good, so quickly because their creators had fed into them every last line of poetry ever written. He was sure that, over time, their poems would become stale and repetitive because they never really created anything new – just spat back out what they had been fed. To prevent his new poems from being used to refresh the rhymebots data banks, the Poet decided that he would no longer write anything down but would keep his poems only inside his own head. So this is what he did, filling his mind with his writing. Too frightened even to speak them out loud in case somebody heard them and stole them for the rhymebots. He went out less and less frequently, living mainly in a single room. Everyone forgot about the Poet ... well, almost everyone.

Secretly, the King himself was a big fan. He did not want to admit to this for fear of being seen as odd and, maybe, a little old-fashioned. Still, he kept an ear open for news of the Poet and was increasingly upset as he heard the stories of his isolation and hermit-like lifestyle. When contact began to be lost with the outlying planets of the empire, the King realised that time may be running out, and he decided that he had to act. Orders were given that the Poet should be invited to join the King's party at Ringwood Village. There were people who raised their eyebrows at the invitation. Not least among these was the Poet himself. He wrote several letters declining the invitation – which were never sent and were quickly destroyed – before finally writing to accept. In his heart, he knew that his own poetry had become stale of late – after so many years sat alone in his room – and he worried that he was no longer a match for the rhymebots. Maybe the beautiful environment of the village, so close to nature, would bring new life to his imagination. If this happened, then surely he could compose a masterpiece – the pinnacle of his life's work – which he would write down

and present as a gift to the King. Undoubtedly this gift would be met with little enthusiasm, as the man was seen as young and shallow – just the sort who would prefer the work of the rhymebots. Nevertheless, it seemed important to make some gesture, at this time when ultimate destruction was sweeping the galaxy. So, packing nothing but the King's invitation, a pen and some paper, the Poet set off on what he believed would be his final journey.

Amazingly, the King's thoughts and hopes were more in tune with the Poet's than either of them could guess. He too understood that there was no way to stop the fire, and he had determined that, as the King, he should at least try to die a noble death. His plan was to stand, fearless, in the path of the flames, reading aloud the last poem of the last poet. In this way, he would demonstrate to the universe the height to which his civilisation had risen and the emptiness that would be left by its destruction.

The plan did not go well. He greeted the Poet warmly on his arrival, then noticed that the man had no luggage and asked if his bags were being delivered separately.

"I had hoped," said the King, "that you would permit me to read some of your recent verses."

"Your majesty," replied the Poet gravely, "I regret that it is now many years since I last entrusted my poetry to paper."

Of course, the King was devastated. The thought of his final noble act had stopped him from worrying about the coming disaster. Now he tried to persuade, plead and beg the Poet to write him a poem for the end of the world. Finally, when he ordered the Poet to write something, the King crossed a line.

"Inspiration is not yours to command ... or mine for that matter," shouted back the Poet, completely forgetting to whom he was speaking. Then he stormed off into the forest, taking no further notice of anyone around him.

At first, the King thought that he would come to his senses and apologise, but by the next morning, when there was still no sight or sound of the Poet, a search was organised. Hearing reports, now, of fire on the home planet, the King had become desperate to get his poem, and he led the search himself. The Poet, who had crept back to the village in the dead of night, watched through a crack in his hut door as the search party disappeared into the forest. The truth was that the Poet really did want to write his last poem for the King, but he had lost all confidence in himself. The forest had not inspired him as he had hoped it would, and now he just wanted to hide so that no one would discover that his talent had gone.

He stayed hidden all morning – until just after lunchtime, in fact – when he was drawn out of his hut by cries of panic and confusion. There were not many people in the village, and it was quite quiet. All the noise was coming from the forest. Curious, the Poet took a few steps forward ... and then he saw the flames. A wall of fire was advancing on the village from all sides, yet there was not an ounce of fear in him as he walked forward to meet it. He found the flames beautiful, as they burnt in their ever-changing patterns of black and red. Their impossible silence, as they swept forward, seemed to speak to him as loudly as a whole orchestra. In short, the Poet was sure that he had found his inspiration, and he hardly noticed when the force-wall zinged into life behind him. He hardly noticed as the people pushed past him, trying to get away from the flames, and he hardly noticed as his body was burnt away by countless bolts of lightning. In fact, now that he was freed from the requirement to eat or sleep, the Poet felt liberated. He stood staring at the flames for several weeks as he composed his masterpiece. When he did finally move again, it was with a clear purpose – to find the

King and to give him the poem, but the King was nowhere to be found. A few of the spirits claimed to have seen him being caught and killed by the flames – a story which the Poet refused to believe. Instead, he became convinced that the King had made it to the safety of the village. When the first elders made it through to the wasteland and it became clear that the King was not among them, the Poet still did not despair. He began to believe that his monarch would find a way to escape from the flames and return to him. He forced himself to believe this, even though no one else had ever come back. Now he spent his time constantly reworking his one final poem. That is, when he wasn't chatting with his fellow shades, practising his shadow tricks and helping the elders find the spirits that they needed most. Because the elders were right – he had become incorruptible. There was only one thing he wanted - the return of the King – and his only hope for that was to wait here, in the wasteland. Even if he had to wait forever.

The Little Alien stared hard at the flames, his mind a jumble of thoughts, trying to find his own inspiration in the ever-changing shapes. He was not altogether sure that he could trust the Poet. Certainly, the Historian did not seem to like him. Even now he stood glaring as the Poet did more tricks – rolling his head along his arms, then spinning it on the end of his finger. However, there were hundreds of spirits in the wasteland, what chance did he have of finding the right two or three if he didn't have help.

“Okay,” said the Little Alien to the Poet, “so where do we start?”

The Poet, who had now split his head into two smaller heads, blinked his four eyes.

“That depends on what you want to find,” said one head.

“To put it another way, it depends on what skills you think are most important to your mission,” said the other.

The Little Alien thought carefully for a few moments.

“I'll need a plan,” he said, “but it will need to be flexible because I don't know what challenges I'll face. Then again, I'll need some discipline if I'm going to succeed. Things are bound to get tough, and I'm sure that the way ahead won't always be clear.”

“Tricky,” said the Poet, “I'd better put my heads together.”

He looped his tentacle up around both heads and squeezed until there was an audible ‘pop’. When he unwound his tentacle, there remained only one head, which grinned and winked at the Little Alien.

“What you need,” said the Poet, “is a military man. They are usually good at planning and always very disciplined. Furthermore, they are not often so lucky as to know exactly what the enemy will do next, so they are always good at dealing with changing circumstances.”

Here, the Poet stood to attention and saluted.

“No plan survives contact with the enemy,” he snapped out in clipped military tones, “A good friend of mine said that, and he should know. He was head of all the galaxy's armed forces.”

“You know a general?” said the Little Alien, the disbelief clear in his voice.

“Sometimes I lower myself to befriend people from the inferior social classes,” replied the Poet, “but I never said he was a general. I said that he was head of the armed forces –

Chief of the Defence Staff and answerable only to the King. In fact, he likes to be called ‘the Captain’.”

“How can a captain be head of the army?”

The Little Alien had only a sketchy knowledge of the old military structures, gained from his exploration of the city, but this did not seem to match with anything he had learnt.

“That is a question best answered by the man himself,” answered the Poet, “Would you like to meet him?”

“Yes, please” cried the Little Alien.

“Very well,” said the Poet, “Then come with me, but please, let me do the talking.”

They set off through the wilderness, leaving the Historian behind, and walked a little way round the edge of the village. Soon, as the place was so very small, they approached one of the shadow figures, and the Poet put a finger to his lips. The figure had its back to them and seemed to be staring at the flames, showing not the least movement. The Poet started to tiptoe round to the left of the stationary spirit, signalling to the Little Alien that he should stay where he was. After a few more steps, he removed his head and threw it further to the left, while his body sprinted to the right.

“Stop!” shouted the figure.

The Poet halted immediately. Maybe because of the clear authority in the voice of the stranger, but more likely, the Little Alien thought, because this was some sort of private game.

“Body to my rear: angle 20° left, distance eight paces. Head to my rear: angle 30° left, distance five paces.”

The Little Alien was amazed. The Poet had made no sound, the stranger’s back was turned, and yet he had called the locations with utmost accuracy. Now the Captain – there could be no further doubt about the figure’s identity - cocked his head to one side as if listening.

“There is someone else,” he announced, “A villager is with you ... the young one. Directly behind me at fifteen paces.”

“Amazing,” said the Poet, or rather his head did, as his body picked a way between the boulders to retrieve it, “One day you must teach me how you do that.”

“It is my unique connection to the wasteland,” said the Captain, bending low and placing his hand on the soil by his feet, “It cannot be taught. I know not why, but the earth chooses to speak to me alone.”

He straightened, and the Little Alien thought he saw the hand close around something on the ground. The same hand then moved up past the Captain’s face, before clutching at his forehead.

“All I know is that it gives me a terrible headache. For some reason, it feels the need to shout everything it says.”

The Captain turned around, and the Little Alien saw a body and face much like all the other shadow creatures. There was, however, slightly more purpose in the way he stood: a readiness for action; a precision about the position of claw, tentacle and hand.

“Captain,” the Poet cried, finally fixing his head back on his shoulders and blinking a little, “how delightfully you spin your little bits of nonsense, but we’ve no more time for games today. As you so cleverly spotted, I’ve brought a friend to meet you. He has a mission – I’m sure you already know about that - and he needs some help.”

The Captain stepped forward smartly, coming to attention and making a precise salute with his claw.

“Indeed. I am fully briefed and ready to assist.”

Then he relaxed a little.

“I know that you civilians prefer to shake hands,” he said, “but I’m afraid it’s rather tricky if one is made of nothing but shadow.”

The Little Alien said that he did not mind a bit, then blurted out: “Were you really head of the army?”

“Not just head of the army,” said the Captain, proudly, “but Chief of the Defence Staff. You see the King is Commander in Chief of all the armed forces, and he needs someone who knows how the military works to make sure- ”

“-I’m afraid that the lesson in military hierarchy will have to wait,” interrupted the Poet, “The youngster is on an important mission, as I said, and I think that you can help him. Of course, he has to make up his own mind, so why don’t you tell him your story ... and do remember, *I* am listening, so you had better tell the truth.”

The Captain levelled a very hard stare at the Poet. It was clear that he did not take kindly to having his truthfulness questioned in this way. After a few moments, however, he sighed heavily, and his shoulders drooped ever so slightly.

“I was never really head of the armed forces,” he said, looking the Little Alien in the eye “It is true that I hold the title Chief of the Defence Staff, but by the time I was appointed, there was no military left – I was chief of myself. I still carry the title with honour, but it is also a cruel reminder that, when the time came, I failed my king and doomed those put under my protection to this eternal prison.”

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## Chapter 9: The General's Tale

In the days before the fire, the barracks was a marvellous place for any soldier to be. A sprawling collection of impressive buildings close to the centre of the city, it served as the galactic headquarters for the King's army. It was no surprise, therefore, that a great many generals had made it their home. The Captain worked for one of these generals. His name was General Walrus. A good name, which described the shape of his body, his stern appearance, the quality of his mind, the lack of urgency in his behaviour and even his tone of voice. Like any other general, General Walrus had a particular set of needs. It was necessary that he received daily reports on military matters so that he would be fully informed when he made the many important decisions that were required of his rank. Once these decisions had been made, they needed to be translated into action. This meant preparing sets of clear, written orders that were communicated to the various units under the general's command, and of course, ensuring that those orders were carried out to the letter. The Captain, in his role as the general's staff-officer, carried out these duties. On top of this, he also made sure that General Walrus got his meals on time, always had a clean uniform to wear and was never late for his meetings. In summary, the Captain had a bewildering array of duties to perform, but they could all be summed up in one statement - his job was to ensure that General Walrus was never *ever* embarrassed in front of the other generals.

It was lucky that the Captain was extremely good at his job because General Walrus attracted embarrassments like a magnet, and there was one area, in particular, that was a source of constant danger. Unsurprisingly, given his position, the general was in charge of a good many soldiers, and they all had to be kept at the peak of readiness in case there was an attack on the empire. The difficult part, given that there had been no military action in the galaxy for thousands of years, was knowing what sort of enemy they might have to face. The army was already equipped to meet any *known* threat with overwhelming and decisive force, but the military strategists had decreed that this was not enough. Therefore, every general had been tasked with determining the best way of beating *unknown* enemies and training their soldiers in these new tactics. Given the importance attached to such preparations, the lack of any real threats and just because they were a competitive bunch, the generals took every opportunity to boast and brag about their mastery of these imaginary invaders.

"I just had the men trained to defeat an attack by hordes of organised ants," one general might say, over brandy and cigars in the evening.

"Indeed?" another might reply, with a dismissive wave of the tentacle "My men mastered the tactics necessary to defeat *any* insect-related hostiles about a year ago. Now we're working on a way to neutralise clouds – you never know when *they* might turn nasty."

"Save you the trouble, old boy," a third would cut in, "We did clouds last week. I'll send my captain over to take your man through the details. Then we can concentrate on the real threat ... space kittens."

The problem with all of this was that General Walrus was not very imaginative. In fact, he suffered from a staggering lack of imagination. When he gave someone a birthday present, it would always be boot polish – black boot polish. If you asked him to think of a number, it would always be seven and a half. Therefore, it was the Captain who spent his days and nights thinking – and dreaming – of what kind of enemy might appear. Then he spent weeks and months working out the best way to defeat each kind: airships for the flying enemies;

nets for the merman invasion; ultrasonic weapons to defeat the mole people. Often, when he presented these plans, General Walrus would insist that the men be trained in the new tactics immediately. The Captain would then have to organise classroom training, parade ground exercises and field-based war games. This last category was the most difficult. War games involved hundreds of soldiers running around the countryside and fighting imaginary enemies. There were orders to be written, transports to be arranged and field kitchens to be set up. As if this weren't enough, there were always a number of unexpected events to be managed, but the resourceful captain had even devised a method to prepare for these. He wrote long lists of, what he called, 'actions on'. For example:

- ✓ Actions to be taken on a failure in the main communications array ...
- ✓ Actions to be taken on the advent of inclement weather ...
- ✓ Actions to be taken on the start of a real enemy invasion while we're practising for an imaginary enemy invasion ...
- ✓ Actions to be taken on the general's supply of tea running out ...

This exhaustive system of preparation had served the Captain well over the years, and his hard work had prevented many a disaster in the field. However, there was one event that was so unlikely – so unexpected – that it took even the Captain by surprise. General Walrus had an idea. Even worse, he had an idea about a new type of enemy. It all started with a dream. A very vivid dream - no doubt brought on by eating strong cheese just before bedtime – and this dream included some characters who were entirely invisible. Consequently, the general woke up obsessed with the possibility of being attacked by an invisible enemy. To prepare for this, he insisted that the Captain devise a war game in which the soldiers would be blindfold.

"But, sir," argued the Captain, "it's only the enemy who will be invisible. Surely we will put ourselves at a much greater disadvantage if we can't see *anything*."

"You're missing the strategic view," replied the general, "The enemy gains an advantage because he confuses one of our senses – our sight. If we take away our sight, then the enemy will have no advantage. He will be dismayed that his main weapon against us has been rendered useless, and so he will be easy to defeat."

"I admire your logic, sir. I just think that there's a good chance our men will end up shooting each other," countered the Captain, but the general would have none of it.

"You have your orders, captain," was all he said.

There was no option but to go ahead with the foolish exercise, so the Captain devoted all his energies to making sure that at least no one would get hurt. He chose an area of countryside that was very flat and had hardly any trees. He made sure that no one had any bullets for their guns ... or was carrying anything sharp. Just in case, he also arranged for plenty of medics and ambulances to be on hand.

So detailed was the Captain's plan that everything would have been okay ... if it hadn't been for the rabbits. The exercise started well, with the soldiers marching across a large empty field towards their destination. Although they were blindfold, each man had a tentacle on the shoulder of the person in front and a hand on the person to their left. In this way, they made progress in good order. The general, who stood with the Captain on a nearby hill, watched with satisfaction through his binoculars.

“Well done, captain,” he said, “It looks like we’ll have those invisible enemies beaten in no time. Plus, the men are making a good job of clearing out the rabbit population.”

Startled, the Captain raised his own binoculars and saw that the field was indeed alive with rabbits. They were running here and there, frightened by the marching ranks of men. Immediately, he understood the danger.

“General,” he cried, “we must stop the exercise. I’ll go and warn the men now.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” barked back the general, “It’s all going splendidly from what I can see. Besides, this is very important practice for the men. Whatever happens, we must allow them to finish.”

It was at this point that the first man tripped. His foot, you see, had slipped into a rabbit hole, and he went down howling in pain, with his ankle twisted or maybe even broken. As he writhed on the ground, several of the other soldiers tripped over him, and soon there was a big gap in the formation. The same thing happened again and again. Each time, the Captain begged to be allowed to stop the exercise. Each time, the general refused. Eventually, a ragged group of soldiers made it to the objective – the enemy’s flag – and the Captain was allowed to go and assess the damage. All told, there were over a hundred casualties. Twenty people had broken ankles, another thirty had bad sprains and the rest were cuts and bruises. It was fortunate that medical care was on hand. Otherwise, things could have been much worse. The men who had been injured quickly recovered. For the Captain, however, the damage was more permanent.

Not long after the disastrous field-exercise, the Captain started to notice a change in the behaviour of the people around him. He had always been a well-respected and popular figure around the barracks, but now it seemed that everyone just wanted to ignore him. His fellow officers would fall silent as he entered the mess hall. Anyone senior would pretend not to see him. Anyone junior would melt away, avoiding him as you might avoid someone with a terrible disease. Eventually, another captain – someone who had once been a close friend – explained what had happened.

“General Walrus told all the other generals about the blindfold exercise. He said that it was your idea and all your fault that things got out of hand. According to the general, he only saved your career by personally pleading your case and reminding everyone of your long years of service.”

The Captain’s friend paused, embarrassed by what he had to say next.

“I’m afraid that they all had a good laugh about it. It won’t be long before the story gets all round the barracks. There’s no other way to say it – Walrus has hung you out to dry.”

Sure enough, over the next few days, the Captain became the butt of everyone’s jokes. Soldiers practising marching on the parade ground would start to hop when they saw him coming. Men of all rank would return his salute with their front teeth protruding over their bottom lip. Then there were the terrible puns that were used whenever he was in earshot. ‘could I *burrow* some boot polish’ ... ‘I mustn’t *rabbit* on all day’ ... ‘I’d better *hop* to it’. It would have broken a lesser man, but the Captain was stronger on the inside than most people. At his core, his sense of purpose still burnt brightly. He was an officer of the crown, and no matter how uncomfortable his life became, he would continue to be one until the day he died.

Over time, things did get better. People got bored of the jokes and the pranks, but they never entirely forgot. The Captain was now an outsider. Once they realised that he was not



just going to go away, his fellow officers decided to tolerate his presence – even if they were carefully formal in all their dealings with him. General Walrus also allowed things to lapse back into their previous pattern, although the Captain found it increasingly difficult to follow the general’s orders without question – as he knew a good soldier should do.

Faced with this isolation, the Captain became obsessed with the only friend he had left - his duty. He continued to imagine ever greater enemies, and he continued to plan ways to defeat them all. When the first news of the fire reached the barracks, therefore, the Captain felt a sudden surge of excitement and energy. Finally, here was the thing he had been practising for. Not one of the general’s pathetic imaginings but a real enemy against whom he could pit his wits in a battle to the death. In years to come, the Captain would often reflect with amazement at his lack of wisdom at this time, but in the moment, his sense of purpose made him unstoppable.

Across the barracks, there were endless meetings, planning sessions, briefings and councils of war. The Captain attended none of them. He understood that no one yet had enough information to come up with a plan. So, he concentrated his efforts on gathering that information. He read everything that he could, used his connections to get all the military intelligence available, and travelled the barracks and the city in search of anyone who had knowledge to share. He did not sleep for days, and one night he found himself outside the door of an ordinary building in the suburbs of the city. A building that was said to be the home of a brilliant inventor. As it was already late – almost late enough to be morning – his first few knocks went unanswered. Soon, he was hammering on the door.

“Open up! This is a matter of galactic security,” he was shouting as the door creaked open.

In the dim light of the hallway, there stood a man who looked old, although the Captain guessed he was only in late middle-age. His scales were unbrushed, he wore a threadbare and very old-fashioned nightshirt, and his eyes stared out wildly from beneath droopy lids. In fact, the man gave such a strong impression of being crazy that the Captain found his whole body tensing, as if preparing for an attack.

“I knew it was only a matter of time before you bully boys found me,” said the Inventor. Sticking his head out of the doorway so that he could peer up and down the street, he continued, “Where’s the rest of the goon squad? Hiding no doubt. Ready to jump out if I make any trouble.”

The Captain had no idea how to reply to this. Fortunately, the man seemed to be having a conversation with himself.

“Honestly, I was expecting more. What are you? Just a captain! Are you even carrying a gun?”

“Of course not,” cut in the Captain, beginning to be irritated, “The law forbids soldiers from carrying weapons inside the city.”

“Oh, that’s a disappointment,” said the Inventor, his face falling, “Yet again, I’m not being taken seriously.”

He dropped his eyes to the floor, sighed sadly and started to close the door.

The Captain thought furiously. He had to keep the conversation going – keep this man’s attention and find out what he knew. Whatever craziness was going on inside the Inventor’s

head, the Captain had to become a part of it. There were many skills that he had developed in the army – martial arts, weaponry, psychological warfare – but now it was time to deploy the skill he saved for the most desperate of situations. Now it was time for some acting. The Captain shot out a tentacle to block the door and so bought himself a few more seconds.

“They told me that you were clever, but I didn’t realise that you’d be so crafty,” he said, looking the man in the eye, “Tell me, what gave it away? How did you see through my disguise so quickly?”

Although he did not answer, the Inventor had stopped pushing against the door, and the Captain knew that he had the advantage. He slapped his forehead with his hand.

“Of course, it was the gun, wasn’t it? No one would send an unarmed man – just a captain at that – to confront someone with a reputation like yours. As soon as you saw that I wasn’t carrying a gun, you knew that I had to be a Ninja Spy.”

The Inventor’s eyes widened, and he let the door swing open.

“That’s right,” said the Captain, seeing that he had struck the right note, “I’m a Ninja Spy from military intelligence. The captain’s uniform – that’s just a disguise.”

“I knew it!” cried the Inventor. Then, realising he had been too loud, he glanced up and down the street before continuing in a lower voice, “I knew that sooner or later I’d come to the attention of you secret squirrels. What was it that did it? Was it the subversive pamphlets, or the telepathic weather control, or the anti-weapon research, or the-”

“Stop! That was it,” interrupted the Captain, “It was the anti-weapons.”

“Well then,” said the Inventor, who was now feeling so proud that he was visibly inflated, “you’d better come inside, so we can discuss the terms of my surrender. Would you like some tea?”

The Captain was led into a surprisingly large room, partly decorated as an old-fashioned sitting room but mostly given over to racks and racks of complicated scientific equipment. Over a mug of hot, sweet tea, he was then treated to a detailed telling of the Inventor’s life story. Although he now looked quite crazy, he really had been – probably he still was – quite brilliant. A scientist with an incredible knowledge of facts and figures, but also with a huge store of creativity. Over the course of a very few years, he moved to a research post at the city’s largest university and then to a highly paid job creating new products for the galaxy’s largest scale-care company - the Captain was surprised to find that the cream he used on his own scales was invented by this man. Finally, but still at a very young age, this amazing man moved to a top-secret job in the military.

“Why aren’t you writing any of this down?”

The question jerked the Captain back to full alertness. The sweet tea, the comfortable chair and several days without sleep had lulled him into a daydream where he was listening to some weird bedtime story. He thought fast.

“Too important,” he snapped back, in his best military voice, “If I were captured, they might be able to break my code – I always write in code, of course – but they’d never be able to break into here.”

The Captain tapped his head and gave the Inventor a look that said: you've worked on the secret side of the military; you know what it's like. The Inventor smiled happily, satisfied that he was dealing with a very serious operative indeed, and continued his story.

Those days with the military were the happiest of his life. He got to invent and build all kinds of cool things – things that people had only dreamt of before. Best of all, he was on the inside. He worked with important people, like generals and government officials. These people respected him and listened when he spoke, and they shared a secret – because everything that he did for the military was top, top, *top* secret. It was like being part of a club that allowed only the finest people in the galaxy as members.

It was difficult to pinpoint when things started to go wrong. The Inventor had always been a little bit absent-minded, but when he got wrapped up in his exciting new projects, it just got worse and worse. People – his important friends – began to comment on his forgetfulness and eccentric behaviour. At first, it was treated as a bit of a joke. Like when he started writing on a sandwich at lunchtime and trying to eat his notepad, but it soon got worse. The Inventor assumed that his friends would ignore or accept his little peculiarities, but when he arrived at work one day without any trousers on, it was clear that he had crossed a line. He was sent home for 'a rest', and the very next day a major arrived at his front door to explain that his services were no longer required. His personal belongings would be sent to him. There was no need for him to trouble himself by coming to collect them. There was some explanation – mental strain; psychological vulnerability; security risk. Whatever words they used, however, the message was the same. They thought he was crazy, and they wanted him gone.

Life after that was difficult. The Inventor was no longer in the special club, and he felt lonely. To get himself noticed, he started staging one-man protests against the military. He wrote pamphlets and handed them out in the city square, but all his antics just convinced people that he really was crazy. In the privacy of his own home, he continued to invent and build brilliant devices, yet as soon as he stepped outside the door, he could not help behaving like a lunatic. People would say very hurtful things to him. They would call him names, and sometimes they would chase him away. It was after one of these incidents that the Inventor came home and started to build the Omnishield – a device that would protect him from *anything* harmful, even a word or a thought. He understood that the world, which most people saw as a single reality, was actually made up of different layers. Why couldn't good things be sent to one layer and bad things to another?

"This Omnishield," interrupted the Captain, "did you ever complete it?"

"Oh, I built a prototype," said the Inventor, "but it was no use. Physical and metaphysical threats could be blocked quite easily, but the really damaging things – thoughts and emotions ... well, I could never get the calibration right."

"So you mean," the Captain spoke slowly and carefully, "that you have a device here that will protect against any physical danger?"

"Yes ... and metaphysical," said the man, "but what use is that to me!"

"What if I told you that, if I could show your device to my superiors, I could get you your job back ... you could be back in the club?"

The Captain knew that he was probably lying, but he felt that he had no choice. To help his conscience, he made a silent promise that he would come back and save this man from the fire - if he could.

Without a word, the Inventor got up and walked over to the racks of equipment. After searching for a few minutes, he returned with a large canvas bag – it was so large that he had to drag it across the floor. Dropping it in front of the Captain, he pulled the bag open to reveal a bundle of large rods. Reaching in amongst these, he pulled out a cube that had buttons, switches and dials spread over all six sides.

“If you’re going to use this,” he said, his eyes twinkling, “you’re going to need a bit of training.”

Two hours later, his mind whirling, the Captain once again found himself outside the ordinary door, but this time he was carrying a large and heavy canvas bag. The Inventor was shaking his hand and wishing him luck when he suddenly stopped and looked very serious.

“If you plan to use this for real,” said the Inventor, “make sure that you’re inside the force-wall when you activate the shield. Anyone caught in the area between the force-wall and the perimeter – a place I call the penumbra – will be protected from metaphysical dangers, but not from physical ones. That could have ... unfortunate results.”

At the time, the Captain had no idea what this meant, so he just smiled and thanked the Inventor, promising to contact him soon about resuming his work. When he tried to take back his hand, however, the Inventor held on. He was staring into the Captain’s eyes with a look of genuine fear on his face.

“Tell me the truth,” he whispered, “are you really a Ninja Spy?”

“Of course not,” replied the Captain, giving the Inventor an exaggerated wink, “ask anyone you like, and they’ll tell you there’s no such thing as a Ninja Spy department in the military.”

Then the Captain walked off down the street, leaving the Inventor with a smile on his face and a tear of joy in his eye. The Captain was smiling too because he hadn’t yet realised that there was no way he was going to be able to keep his promise.

By the time the Captain returned to the barracks, the sun was up and the earliest risers were active in the many courtyards and passageways. It was still an hour before General Walrus was usually awake, so the Captain was surprised to find him seated at the breakfast table, in full uniform and with three other generals in attendance.

“Ah, captain, here at last,” said the general, obviously cross but unwilling to be rude to the Captain in front of his fellow generals, “Be a good chap and organise some coffee, would you.”

“Of course, sir,” replied the Captain, “but when you have a moment, there’s a matter of some importance that requires your attention.”

“Nonsense, captain,” barked the general, “There can be nothing more important than the safety of the King.”

“Sir?” said the Captain, taken by surprise.

“Your captain seems to be lost,” sniggered one of the other generals, “You always used to say he was so well informed.”

“Have you not heard?” said the general, his voice now raised to a full walrus bellow, “The fire has arrived on this, our home planet. The King is isolated and alone at Ringwood Village. We have signalled his protection officers to bring him to the barracks immediately, but they seem unable or unwilling to comply. Our conference,” the general swept his tentacle around the table, “is to determine how to rescue the King and bring him here.”

“What if the King could be best protected where he is – in Ringwood Village?” asked the Captain.

Everyone laughed at this, except General Walrus. He went red as a beetroot.

“What nonsense,” his voice was now loud enough to make the light fittings shake, “Any cadet fresh into the academy knows that the barracks where we now sit has the strongest defences in the whole galaxy. Really, captain, I don’t know what’s got into you today. Please keep any further opinions to yourself, and go and organise some breakfast.”

The general shot an evil look at the Captain and his scruffy canvas bag before making his final cutting remark.

“And take your washing with you!”

“Sir!”

The Captain came to attention, saluted smartly, picked up his bag and left. All his life, he had followed any order he was given, but now he did not head for the kitchen to organise coffee and breakfast. He headed for the hanger, where they kept the flyers. He had to get to Ringwood Village, and he had to get there quickly.

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## Chapter 10: The Pilot

The barracks covered a large area, and the way that the different buildings had been constructed over time meant that it was like a maze to the first-time visitor. The Captain, however, was so familiar with the layout that he covered the distance to his destination in only a few minutes. The early morning quiet had still not been broken, so as he approached the hanger, it was easy to identify the sounds of voices raised in argument, but it was not until he rounded the final corner that he saw who was making all the noise. A short person in a bubble suit was arguing with a taller man who wore a sergeant's uniform.

"I must have a flyer," said bubble-suit, "I'm the pilot for the generation ship. Don't you understand what that means?"

"All I understand," said the sergeant, "is that written authorisation is required for the release of a flyer, and you don't have anything written."

"But ... but ... the species," spluttered the Pilot, unable to comprehend this seemingly illogical behaviour.

To the Pilot, the sergeant seemed as solid as a rock; but not to the Captain. He was quite at home in this sort of situation. He knew exactly what was going on in the sergeant's head, and he knew just how to use that to his advantage. Quickly, the Captain folded a blank piece of paper from his notebook, and across the top, he scribbled General Walrus' signature. Many times in the past, the general had asked the Captain to sign 'boring bits of paper' for him – orders, invoices, laundry lists and the like – so signing the general's name was as natural to him as signing his own. He approached the door to the hanger with a purposeful stride – neither too quick nor too slow – and when he spoke it was in the clipped tones of a person sure of his authority.

"Ah, pilot, you're here. Good ... but what did you think you were doing trying to get through without me? You know that there's no admittance without these."

Here, the Captain lifted the paper out of his pocket just far enough so that the sergeant could see the general's signature, but not so far that he could see the rest of the paper was blank. Without even looking at the sergeant, the Captain stepped towards the door, still talking to the Pilot.

"Step smartly now. No dawdling."

The sergeant was already stepping aside, but he too had been in the army a long time, and he had a scale that tingled when someone was trying to trick him. It tingled now.

"If I could just -" he began, but the Captain cut him off.

"Good gracious, sergeant, is that mud on your boot? Did you even polish those this morning?"

Quickly, while the sergeant had bent down to inspect his footwear, the Captain swept past and into the hanger, pulling the Pilot behind him.

"You, my friend, are going to take me to Ringwood Village," hissed the Captain as they made their way to one of the flyers that stood ready for take-off.

"I can't," replied the Pilot, "I've got to get to the Garrick Mountain Spaceport."

The Captain paused, ready to argue, but then he heard the muffled sound of the sergeant's voice from the doorway.

"You hear that?" asked the Captain, and the Pilot nodded, "That sergeant's no fool. He's checking my authorisation with the general. Let's get in the air pronto. Once we're clear, we can decide on our destination."

"But you've got authorisation. I saw ..."

The Pilot's voice trailed off as the Captain, like a magician revealing the secret of a trick, lifted the paper out of his pocket, showing that, apart from the signature, it was completely blank.

Without further words, they scrambled into the nearest flyer. The Captain was securing the canvas bag in the back seat, even as the Pilot started the engines. Smoothly they lifted off, the roof of the hanger opening just wide enough for them to get through.

"Now," said the Pilot, "I'm afraid that we really must go to the spaceport first. I have to pilot that generation ship. You do understand what that means, don't you?"

"I understand," said the Captain, "but Ringwood Village is more important."

"What could possibly be more important than the generation ship?"

"The King is at Ringwood Village, and I have ..." the Captain jerked his thumb back towards the canvas bag, "the only device in the universe that can save him from the flames."

The Pilot hesitated for only a fraction of a second. Mainly he was wondering whether or not the Captain was insane, but his passenger gave the distinct impression of composure and authority.

"You win," he said, "Setting course for Ringwood Village."

"Thank you."

The Captain looked very intently at the Pilot for a few moments before he spoke again.

"I promise, once the King is safe, I'll do everything in my power to get you to that ship ... Wait! Stop!"

As the flyer turned, the Captain had caught sight of something behind the Pilot. A sea of flame was rolling across the city, heading straight for the barracks. Below they could see defences being activated – shimmering force-walls appearing around the buildings and gun turrets swinging into life on sentry towers. The guns opened up first, pouring a barrage of energy bolts into the flames. It was so bright that the Pilot and the Captain had to shield their eyes, but there was no effect on the wall of fire. Watching this unusual battle, the Captain felt a fluttering in his stomach. Having survived countless life and death situations, he knew that, in cases like this, there was not time to wait for the plodding steps of rational thought. He had learnt to trust to his instincts and to pay attention to their signals. So, the Captain knew now that the feeling in his gut was a sign of mortal danger – his subconscious mind was calling him to action.

"We should get out of here," he said to the Pilot.

"Why? We're way above the flames."

Below them, the wall of fire rolled on, crossing the boundaries of the force-walls as if there was nothing there.

“We have to go NOW,” shouted the Captain.

“I think you might be right,” said the Pilot quietly. Suddenly, he was also feeling very nervous, and despite his calm exterior, he was working the controls with a haste bordering on panic. He brought the flyer round quickly, tipping the machine almost vertical so as to get the best possible acceleration. Even so, just as they started moving forward, there was a terrible tearing sound from behind them. It lasted less than a second before the boosters kicked in and they shot clear.

“What was that?” asked the Captain.

“I think it was the landing gear being ripped off.”

“Is that important?”

“Not until we want to land,” replied the Pilot grimly.

It was not a long way to the village, not at the speed that they were travelling, and they passed the time in silence. The Captain had thought that, if the Omnishield didn’t work, he could evacuate the King using the flyer. Now it seemed that this was not an option. The deadly effects of the flames reached high into the air – maybe even into space. His brain was now sifting through all the information available to find other options, so far without success. The Pilot, meanwhile, was also deep in thought. He was trying to figure out how to land the flyer without landing gear. Both men were jolted back from their thoughts by the sight of the King’s party down below. There were about twenty of them in all – servants, guards, guests and the King himself. It looked like they were preparing for lunch. A table had been set up in a clearing, and the servants were now busy laying it with cutlery and glasses.

“How close can you set me down?” asked the Captain.

“Well,” said the Pilot slowly, “without landing gear, I wouldn’t want to land too close in case we ... you know ... explode. It would be a shame if I killed the King before you’d had a chance to rescue him.”

The Captain glanced sharply at his companion to see if he was joking, but the Pilot’s face was quite serious.

“As close as you think is safe then.”

“Right ho,” said the Pilot, moving the flyer a little further from the clearing as they started to descend. His face was now a mask of concentration as he positioned the craft with pinpoint care. The Captain, peering downwards, could see nothing but trees below them.”

“Aren’t you meant to land these things on flat, clear ground?” he asked.

“That’s what it says in the manual,” replied the Pilot, beads of sweat forming on his forehead, “but then the manual says that you can’t land without landing gear.”

The Captain opened his mouth then shut it again. The tingle in his stomach was back, telling him that he was not going to like whatever was going to happen next. Fortunately, he did not have long to wait. They were now only millimetres above the tops of the trees.

“Hold on tight,” said the Pilot. He looked over, gave the Captain a reassuring smile and turned off the engines.

The flyer plummeted downwards, crashing through the canopy of leaves. The occupants of the cockpit were thrown into shadow that seemed like blackness, compared to the bright



sunshine of a moment before. Everywhere were the sounds and jolts of impact. Crashes, bangs and scrapes that made the Captain certain that the flyer would not reach the ground in one piece. He realised that their descent was, at least, being slowed by all the vegetation, and that gave him hope. That was until one enormous impact spun the flyer over, smashing all the windows in the cockpit, so that they were now falling upside down with branches and twigs whipping them painfully. The Captain held up his claw to protect his face and gave thanks that the harness was securely fastened. Another huge impact spun them onto their side, and with a thump that travelled through every bone in the Captain's body, they hit the ground. For a moment, everything was still. Then, slowly, the flyer tipped over until it fell with a jolt the right way up. It was such a gentle jolt, compared to what had gone before, that the Captain was surprised to hear the Pilot scream out in pain.

"It's my arm," said the Pilot, his words emerging from between gritted teeth, "I think it's broken."

Remembering the Pilot's talk of explosions, the Captain lost no time in releasing both their harnesses and recovering the canvas bag. Together, he and the Pilot limped away from the flyer. As they got clear, the Pilot looked back and chuckled.

"That was a good landing," he said.

The Captain gave him a look as if he was crazy.

"It's a joke between us pilots. A good landing is anything you can walk away from. A great landing is one where you can re-use the flyer."

"Certainly not great, then," said the Captain, turning to look at the mangled wreck that lay on the forest floor. There was no way that that was going to fly again.

The Pilot stumbled, calling out again in pain, and the Captain helped him over to sit on a tree stump. He could tell that the man had more than just a broken arm, but the Pilot was putting a brave face on it.

"Don't worry about me," he said, "I just need a minute or two to get my breath back, and then I'll head for the village. You need to get to the King. That's what's important now."

The Captain felt terrible, leaving a wounded man like that – all alone in the forest – but he knew the Pilot was right. It hurt his sense of honour that, in only a few hours, he had broken two promises – three, if you counted General Walrus' breakfast. The fire had thrown everything upside down. Before today, his word had been his bond, but now it was exactly the opposite. The chain must be broken. He was determined that one promise – his most important promise – would be kept. He had to give priority to saving the King.

"See you at the village," said the Captain, as if he were issuing a battlefield objective. Then his expression changed to one of genuine regret, as he continued. "I'm sorry, but it looks like I won't be able to get you to your ship."

These were his final words to the Pilot. The next moment he had turned and was forcing a path through the forest to find the King.

The Captain did not have far to go. The Pilot really had done an excellent job of picking his landing spot. Within minutes, he had arrived in the clearing where the King and his retinue were preparing for lunch. The guards were none too pleased to see him at first, and he admitted that he probably didn't look his best after the crash, but they were more friendly once he had confirmed his identity.

“The council of generals sent orders for the King to be returned to the barracks,” said one, “but he says he won’t leave the forest. Maybe you can convince him.”

They point blank refused to believe him when the Captain told them that the barracks had been destroyed, but that didn’t matter since they were taking him to see the King anyway. He was led across the clearing to where a short man in jungle clothes was standing staring intently into the trees.

“Your majesty,” said one of the guards, “this man is a staff-officer – a captain – sent by the council of generals. He asked to see you. He says that the barracks has been destroyed.”

The King turned, and the Captain found himself being inspected by a pair of eyes that seemed sad but also held a steely determination.

“I thought that a captain was meant to go down with his ship,” said the King, after looking his visitor up and down.

“I believe that would be true of a naval captain, sire,” said the Captain, uncertain whether or not the King was joking.

“I’m sorry, captain,” the King shook his head as if trying to wake himself from a dream, “I didn’t mean to sound heartless, but ... there is too much suffering. There’s no making sense of this situation. The only question that remains is how best to face the end.”

“This doesn’t have to be the end, sire,” replied the Captain, “That’s why I’m here. I’ve brought a device that can protect you.”

“It’s too late for me, captain,” replied the King, “I have failed my subjects. In my reign, the whole galaxy has been destroyed. I will wait here and suffer the same fate as the rest of my people. *I will go down with my ship.*”

“I’ve seen enough pointless sacrifice,” burst out the Captain, forgetting in his passion that he was talking to the King, “I’ll not allow my king to throw away his life in such a way, not when it is my duty to save him.”

The Captain had made up his mind to seize the King and to take him, by force if necessary, to the village – he had already determined that this is where the Omnishield could most easily be deployed. Alert with his new sense of purpose, the Captain scanned the faces of the guards, sizing them up. Would they try to stop him? He guessed not, but before he could make his move, the King spoke again.

“Captain, I can tell what you have in mind, and it would be a mistake. We could debate the matter, but time is short. I’m afraid you give me no choice ...” the King now raised his voice to a level that would have put a parade-ground sergeant to shame, “As the barracks have been destroyed, I hereby appoint you as the head of all my armed forces.”

The Captain spluttered and went quite red, while the guards raised a small cheer.

“Now, captain,” continued the King, “as head of my armed forces, you are honour bound to obey my every order?”

The Captain nodded.

“With no exceptions?” pressed the King.

“Yes, sire,” confirmed the Captain, still in a state of shock.

“Very well. I order you to go to the village and use this device to protect whichever of my subjects you find there.”

The King cast a glance around the clearing before adding: “Anyone here is free to go with this man. My fate does not have to be yours.”

The Captain realised he had been outplayed, but there was nothing he could do about it. If things had been different, he thought, what a good king this man would have been ... maybe even a great king. Seized by a desire to save him, the Captain dropped to his knees and clasped the King’s hand.

“Please, sire, come to the village. There are dark days ahead, and those who survive will need a leader.”

“My people are often stronger than they themselves realise,” said the King, “but you do raise a good point. I have no uniform to give you – no buttons or badges to show that you are now my chief of staff – so, if anyone does question your authority, show them this.”

The King reached into his pocket and took out a small golden locket, which he handed to the Captain.

“It bears my royal coat of arms and contains a scale from my head. It will be enough to show that you are in the service of the King,” he explained, “Now, captain, I suggest that you hurry to do your duty before the flames overtake you.”

The Captain stood, came to attention and saluted smartly. Picking up the canvas bag, he called out in a clear voice:

“Those who are coming to the village, follow me.”

Singly, and in groups of two or three, the people in the clearing began to move. But they did not move to follow the Captain. They clustered around the King and so made their intentions clear. The Captain moved off, alone, into the forest, but before he crossed the tree-line, he turned back to look directly at the King.

“Sire,” he called across the clearing, “it has been an honour to meet you. My only regret is that I will have so short a time to serve you.”

“And I regret that I have not more time to benefit from your service,” replied the King.

The Captain went first to where he had left the Pilot. The wreckage of the flyer was still there, but there was no sign of his injured companion. Unable, however, to spare the time for a search, he carried on his way. He had to hope that the Pilot would make it back to the village on his own, even though this seemed like wishing for a miracle. This was the lowest point for the Captain. Lack of sleep weighed heavily on his limbs. The canvas bag was bulky and awkward. Even the forest tried to block his way and trip him up, but remembering his meeting with the King gave him a shot of energy and a renewed sense of purpose. He drove forward, using his claw to clear a way through the undergrowth and his tentacle to hold back branches as he passed. When he broke through the final layer of foliage and emerged in the open, he almost felt surprised at how short and easy this stage of his journey had been.

As soon as the Captain passed his keen gaze over the village, however, his spirits sank once more. It was almost entirely deserted. A mere handful, he thought, would not be able to rekindle their civilisation. He wanted to sit down and weep, but blind obedience – drilled into him over a lifetime of service – kept him going. He took the control cube from the bag and

started the process of surveying the space he wanted to protect. This involved walking to the centre of the village, as well as to a few points around the edge. It was a relief to see, as he worked, a few more people drifting back for lunch. Maybe it would become a rallying point when the flames arrived. There had to be a few hundred people in the forest – some would be guests at the village and some day-trippers from the city. If all of them made it back, it should be enough to start anew.

Once the surveying was completed, the Captain pressed a confirmation button, and the control cube started to hum and buzz. After a few seconds, a beam of light shone out from one side, pointing to the edge of the village. The Captain collected the canvas bag and followed the beam. As he walked, the light angled further and further downwards until, just before he reached the tree-line, it pointed straight at the ground, illuminating a small patch of grass at his feet. Reaching into the bag, the Captain pulled out one of the rods and drove it into the grass exactly where the light shone. After tapping it down with his claw, he again pressed the confirmation button on the control cube. Four little legs extended near the base of the rod and burrowed into the ground. At the same time, the light beam swung round to point in a new direction. There were five rods, in all, to plant – all very close to the tree-line – and he was just setting the fourth when he heard the sounds of rising panic coming from the forest. Quickly, he finished and moved on. A few people were now appearing from amongst the trees, heading for the village.

“Get to the village. Run!” the Captain shouted at one person, who had stopped and was evidently considering going back to help others.

He did not pause to find out whether or not his advice was taken. As he reached the fifth spot, his entire mind was concentrated on setting up the last rod. Hurriedly he set it in place and pressed the confirmation button. Nothing happened. The legs did not extend, and looking down, it was easy to see why. The bottom of the rod was mangled and dented, obviously damaged in the crash. The words of the Inventor came drifting back to the Captain: ‘make sure you’re inside the force-wall’. He reckoned that he was at least twenty paces outside where the force-wall would be when he activated the device. He tried letting go of the rod, but it started to topple. He tried pushing the rod further into the ground, but it was too stony. He thought about gathering rocks, to pile around the base, but it was too late – already he could see flames approaching through the trees. Holding the rod upright with his claw, the Captain started to key the activation sequence into the control cube. It was a complex business and there were now plenty of distractions. People were running everywhere, shouting and screaming about the approaching fire, and at one point, someone ran past so close that they almost knocked him over. All in all, the Captain was glad that he had paid close attention during the Inventor’s tedious lesson. Although it seemed to take an age, he finally reached the last button in the sequence, and he gave a cry of triumph as he saw the force-wall start to materialise. The rod in his claw gave a little jump, as though suddenly alive, and he found that it now stayed upright when he let it go.

His work done, the Captain was able to study the scene unfolding in and around the village. The fire continued to approach, and there now seemed to be a great many people huddled against the force-wall. Within the village, no one could be seen, and the Captain began to worry that he had failed in his mission. Backing up, he pulled a gun from his boot – an antique, almost obsolete weapon of war – which he carried despite the city laws because it made him uncomfortable to be completely unarmed. Although it was as much use as a water pistol against a volcano, the Captain took aim at the advancing fire – ready, at least, to do

something to defend the civilians if the omnishield should fail. For the Captain, the world stood still as the flames advanced. When the wall of fire stopped, it took a few heartbeats for him to recognise what had happened. Then a few people from the crowd started cheering, confirming what he saw. He was certainly not going to join the celebrations. The Inventor's words were rolling around his head – 'don't get caught in the penumbra ... unfortunate results'. As the Captain wondered what an 'unfortunate result' might be in these circumstances, his grip on the gun became tighter and tighter until it was shaking in his hand. When the lightning started, he still did not understand that this was the end. Not until the gun, the control cube and the King's locket had all fallen to the ground, did it become clear what unfortunate meant. In the penumbra, there was no physical protection. His body had been swept away, but the metaphysical - his spirit - would survive here forever.

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## Chapter 11: Welcome Guests

The Little Alien had been spellbound by the Captain's story. Now he returned to the present, and he worried that the day was passing by without him making any progress. There was, however, a first step that he could take without any further delay.

"Captain," said the Little Alien, "please would you come with me and help me on my mission?"

"Sir, it would be an honour and a privilege," replied the Captain, coming to attention and saluting once more.

"How should I ... I mean, how do we ... ?"

The Little Alien was at a loss for words. He was trying to ask this spirit how it would get into his head, and it seemed very awkward. Fortunately, the Captain seemed to understand.

"Don't worry," he said, "That will be easy enough when the time comes. However, there are one or two services I can carry out better in my present form, so maybe we can delay the ceremony - just for a few minutes."

It was not at all clear to the Little Alien what the Captain had in mind, but he agreed to the delay without hesitation. Trust, he had begun to realise, would be one of the most important parts of his relationship with the spirits.

"Then if you will follow me," said the Captain, already heading off round the village, "there are a couple more people I'd like you to meet."

The Little Alien looked at the Poet, who shrugged his shoulders and waved his tentacle in the direction the Captain had gone. So they all set off on another short trip across the wasteland. The Poet seemed content to take his time and to dawdle along the way, but the Little Alien had a question for the Captain, so he ran to catch up.

"Please, sir," he said, a little out of breath as he matched the soldier's brisk stride, "could you tell me - when we first met - how did you know what was going on behind you?"

The Captain gave the Little Alien a searching glance, seeming surprised by the question, but he said nothing.

"I think that I saw something," the Little Alien persisted, "Something you picked up from the ground, but I'm not sure what it was."

The Captain now gave him an even sharper look.

"Do you promise not to tell the Poet?" he asked, waiting for a nod before he continued, "It seems that there is more to you than meets the eye, and the same is true of me."

Leaning forward, the Captain delivered a sharp tap to the back of his head with his claw. He caught something in the palm of his hand, which he held out for the Little Alien to see. It was one of the Captain's eyes.

"The Poet thinks he's the only one who can do shadow tricks. His arrogance makes him blind to a rather obvious deception. I simply place my eye on the ground - facing backwards - and I can see all around me."

Having looked back to make sure that the Poet wasn't watching, the Captain popped his eye back into its proper place.

"But we have more important things to discuss than childish games," he said, "I have been thinking about your mission, and there are two clear elements of success. First, you must get to a suitable planet, for which you will need a ship and a pilot. Second, you must plant the seed of a new civilisation, for which you will need to know how to build such a seed – a world-seed."

"Three things," interrupted the Poet, who had appeared at the Little Alien's shoulder, "because he'll also need to get home again. Or had you missed that one, Mister Super Planner."

"It should be obvious," sighed the Captain, "that if you have the means to get there, then you will also have the means to get back."

"Not necessarily," countered the Poet. He turned to the Little Alien, "Yun, please pick up a stone and throw it into the flames."

The Little Alien followed his instructions, and the large pebble he had chosen disappeared into the wall of fire without a sound or a ripple.

"Now, Captain," challenged the Poet, "I'd like to see that stone returned."

The Captain tutted and shook his head. "Philosophical nonsense," he muttered under his breath. It struck the Little Alien that they were putting on a performance at which they were both the actors and the audience. They seemed to enjoy their roles greatly, all the more now that they had a new person to share them with. For now, however, the show was postponed. They had reached their destination.

"Let me introduce you to an old friend of mine," said the Captain, leading the Little Alien to a lone figure who was standing, silently, close by. As they approached, the figure turned, and the Little Alien noticed that – although it was otherwise identical to the other spirits – one arm hung, seemingly useless, at its side. The Captain came to a halt. Standing ramrod straight, he clicked his heels together.

"Allow me to present to you our pilot," he said, and the Little Alien found himself face to face with the character from the Captain's story.

"I thought that you died," was all he could say.

This was not a very polite greeting, but the Pilot didn't seem to mind, and he answered directly.

"I almost did. I was very badly hurt in the crash, and I only just made it here ahead of the flames. By the time I reached the village, I only had enough strength left to crawl. I was pretty sure that I was dying. It was only a question of whether the flames would get me first or if it would be the injuries from the crash that killed me. I was in terrible agony in those last few minutes. It was so bad that I actually felt a massive relief when the lightning burnt away my body. The pain stopped, you see, and I immediately felt a wave of happiness. Later on, of course, I felt differently."

The group stood in silence for some moments, no one really knowing what to say.

"Would you be willing to join me on my mission?" asked the Little Alien at last, "I'll need to be able to fly a spaceship, and it sounds like you were a really good pilot."

“I’d like nothing better,” said the Pilot, “When do we start?”

“Well, I need to find someone who can teach me how to build a world-seed,” said the Little Alien, looking at the Captain to check that he had got this bit right, “Then, I’m afraid, we’re stuck, because although I’ve got a pilot, I’ve not got a ship.”

The Captain smiled, or at least the slit that passed for his mouth grew tighter.

“I believe that when we met,” he said to the Pilot, “you were in a hurry because you had to get to a generation ship?”

The Pilot nodded, and so the Captain continued.

“Maybe you could tell our friend exactly what that is?”

“A generation ship,” began the Pilot, “is a spaceship designed to travel across unimaginably vast distances. The one that I was going to fly was designed to travel between galaxies. Even at the fastest speeds we can achieve, this journey would take longer than a normal lifetime – maybe even several lifetimes – so the ships were called generation ships because several generations might pass before they reached their destination. Our lifespans have increased enormously since the first generation ships were built, but the name is still used – even if it may no longer be entirely accurate.”

The Little Alien felt a chill run down his back. It was as if a cold wind was blowing, although the dust of the wasteland lay undisturbed.

“Why were you going to another galaxy?” he asked.

“Why?” replied the Pilot, “To plant the seed of a new civilisation. In those days we saw it as our duty, and things only became more urgent once the fires started.”

“And where is this ship now?” asked the Little Alien, hardly daring to hope.

“High in the Garrick mountains there is a spaceport,” answered the Pilot, “Above there, in low orbit, is the generation ship ... or, at least, it was. We shall have to find out whether or not it has survived the fire.”

“The buildings in the city survived,” said the Little Alien, suddenly excited.

At this point, the Captain stepped into the conversation. He had seen many plans start out in a blaze of confidence and enthusiasm, only to end up failing utterly. In his opinion, excitement was only useful when accompanied by purposeful action.

“Yes, we have reason to be hopeful,” he said, “but I will work on a backup plan, nevertheless, and we have not yet finished our tour. I must introduce you to one more person.”

This time there wasn’t a long walk, just a few steps to another figure that was silhouetted against the silent, flickering flames.

“I didn’t know at the time,” said the Pilot, “but even if I’d been able to reach my ship, it would have been pointless. The person who was going to build our world-seed was here all along. Just like I was, he was caught out by the speed with which our home world was consumed.”

The figure before them could clearly hear what was being said because he sighed deeply, although he made no reply and his eyes remained glued to the wall of fire.



“He doesn’t speak much,” explained the Pilot, “He was very old when the disaster happened, and the shock of becoming a spirit has affected him more than most, but he *is* the very best man for the job.”

“Sir,” said the Little Alien, walking round so that he was in front of the aged scientist, “Sir, I need your help to start a new civilisation. Will you come with me?”

The shadowy figure turned slightly to look at the Little Alien. Even the indistinct spirit form gave the impression of immense age, and it was clear that this person was old – even older than Altus. It must have been his imagination, but the Little Alien was sure he could hear bones creaking as the man bowed deeply. Straightening slowly, he began to speak.

“Sire, you would be doing me a great favour if you would take me with you. All these years and the only thing I have wished for is the opportunity to finish the job I started so long ago.”

“So you will help me to build a world-seed?” asked the Little Alien, wanting to make sure that the mission was quite clearly understood.

“I will help you by being your tutor,” answered the man, a strict tone now entering his aged voice, “I have been a tutor all my life, and now, it seems, I am *the* Tutor. I would like to teach you many things, but if it is your wish, Sire, then we will start with the construction of a world-seed.”

The spirit made another little bow, accompanied by further improbable creaking sounds. The Little Alien was well satisfied by this answer, but there was one thing that puzzled him.

“I accept your offer, thank you,” he said, “but please tell me, why do you keep calling me ‘sire’?”

“You are the King, are you not?” replied the Tutor in surprise.

“No!” said the Little Alien, barely able to stop himself from giggling.

“Are you sure?” replied the Tutor, “You look just like him ... when he was younger, of course. I was one of his teachers, you know. Such a good student.”

The old man seemed to drift off into thoughts and memories, staring once more into the flames. The Little Alien, somewhat worried by this behaviour, walked back to where the Poet was waiting.

“I need your advice,” he whispered, “I’m not sure about the Tutor. He seems a little odd. You know everyone here. What do you think? Should I take him?”

“Dear boy, thank you so much for placing your confidence in me. I must consider.”

The Poet tipped his head to one side, put his finger on his chin and was silent for a long while. Eventually, he seemed to come back to life.

“It is well known around here,” he said, “that the Tutor is a little ... eccentric. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with that. People say the same about me,” the Poet paused here to shoot an accusing glance at the Captain, “and it must be remembered that we are all alive today because of the eccentric inventor of the Omnishield. However, the Tutor is suffering from more than just a little forgetfulness. His behaviour is not simply unconventional. He seems to have received a great emotional wound, from which he is struggling to recover. No one knows the cause of this wound or if it can be healed, and this makes him unpredictable. Your mission will include moments of extreme pressure for everyone involved. In these

moments, I cannot say with any certainty whether the Tutor will respond with his past brilliance or whether the strain will push him over the edge into complete insanity.”

The Little Alien felt as if a heavy weight had been placed on his heart. It seemed that the Tutor could not help him, and maybe worse still, he could not help the Tutor, but the Poet had not finished.

“However, this man *was* the very best that there ever was – which is why he was chosen for the crew of the generation ship. If you know how to reach him, there could be no better advisor for you. Besides, we don’t have much choice. There aren’t many in the wasteland who know how to build a world-seed.”

“How many?” asked the Little Alien.

“If you include the Tutor?” replied the Poet, “One.”

“We could work it out for ourselves,” countered the Little Alien.

“Yes, possibly we could do that,” answered the Poet, “There are libraries in the city, and you are still young ...”

The Little Alien took a deep breath. He felt as if he had to make a big decision, and it was like taking a step forward in the dark.

“I think I have my crew,” he announced, “I will take the Captain, the Pilot and the Tutor. Now, will you show me how to ... how to carry a spirit?”

The Poet waved his tentacle in the air, making light of the question.

“It is simplicity itself,” he boomed. Then, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “and if I might say so, you have made some very wise choices. Now, let us go and see the Captain.”

They walked over together to where the Captain and the Pilot were standing, waiting in a comfortable silence. The Poet then explained how the ceremony worked – and it really was very simple. The Little Alien had only to touch the tip of his tentacle to the top of the chosen spirit’s head and wish for that spirit to join him. As long as both parties agreed to the transfer, that was all that was needed.

They decided that the Captain would go first. He had to bend slightly so that the Little Alien could reach the top of his head, but once the connection was made, everything went very smoothly. The Captain’s body shimmered and wobbled before dissolving. The wisps of faintly glowing fog that remained flowed up the Little Alien’s tentacle to disappear – it seemed – into his ear. The feeling was not unpleasant, although it appeared to the Little Alien afterwards that he was carrying a heavy weight in his mind.

“Now, let’s pay a visit to your new guest,” said the Poet. He explained that, if the Little Alien went to his gateway, he would find a new door there – the Captain would be waiting on the other side.

Getting to the gateway was quite tricky. The Little Alien was impatient, and he felt more tired than usual. It took several attempts before he found himself standing in the garden of doorways. Not far from where he appeared was a door that, even at first sight, he knew was the one he wanted. It was made of some kind of shiny metal, and it gave the impression of being very strong. The Little Alien approached and noticed that there was a control panel on the door frame.

“I suppose I should ring the bell”, he said to himself, “Even if the Captain is borrowing space in my head, it would be polite to allow him some privacy. He needs to know that I won’t just barge in on him without any warning. Otherwise, how can he relax?”

The Little Alien reached out to push a button that he thought must be the bell, but before he touched it, a light burst out from the control panel, shining right in his eyes and stopping him in his tracks.

“Please state your purpose,” asked a robotic voice.

“I’m here to see the Captain,” answered the Little Alien after a moment’s hesitation.

The light clicked off, and the door mechanism whirled. The shiny metal panel slid upwards to reveal the doorway beyond. The Little Alien took a deep breath and walked through.

To his surprise, he found himself standing on a grassy hill in the sunshine. The Captain was nearby, pacing the grass, but not in his shadow form. Now he was restored in every detail to his former self. He wore a smart, if slightly old-fashioned, uniform, and he was grinning from ear to ear. There was, however, something strange about the scene. There was a smell of smoke in the air, but not wood smoke – it was more metallic, less pleasant. The Little Alien was just sniffing and wondering what it was, when there was a loud whining sound and a huge explosion erupted on the side of the hill, sending sprays of earth high into the air.

“He missed!” cried the Captain.

Seeing the puzzled look on his visitor’s face, he went on to explain.

“They will keep trying to get me, but I’m well out of range here.”

“Who’s they?”

“Why, the Republicans of course,” said the Captain, and he swept his tentacle out to indicate the fields beyond the hill. There, below them, a full-scale battle was raging. It was being fought with guns, swords and all manner of other ancient weapons, and it was the smell of gunpowder that had confused the Little Alien when he arrived. Now he wondered how he could have missed the noise – a roaring and a clattering that rose and fell in his ears like waves on a beach.

“This is the last great battle ever fought by our people,” said the Captain, “Here it was that the king’s forces defeated the Republicans and secured the monarchy. The royal line has stretched unbroken from this battle all the way to-”

For the first time since he arrived, the Little Alien saw the smile leave the Captain’s face. A great sadness seemed to wash over the man, and his body drooped under the weight of it. Then a great cheer rose from the battlefield below, and he brightened.

“Aha! We have taken Henley’s redoubt. Now the Republicans cannot defend their left flank. It is only a matter of time.”

He paused and looked at the Little Alien for a moment before speaking with great feeling and sincerity.

“For as long as I can remember, it has been my greatest wish to witness this historic battle at first hand. By allowing me to live here – inside your mind – you have given me a rare gift, and I am forever in your debt.”

The Little Alien was almost sure that he saw a small tear of happiness in the Captain's eye as he said these words, but he quickly reminded himself that this was a tough old soldier and decided that the tear must have been caused by gun smoke.

"I'm glad that you're comfortable here," he said, trying to play the unfamiliar role of gracious host, "Now I'd better go and see to the others. I'm sure I'll be back to visit again soon. There's such a lot to be done."

"I'll look forward to it," said the Captain, smiling.

The Little Alien turned to go, but as he did, a curious sight caught his eye. Behind the Captain, out of his sight, three rabbits were digging in the earth. Although they looked like normal rabbits, every now and then they would stop, look at the Captain and snigger to each other before continuing. The Little Alien wondered whether to mention them to the Captain but decided it was not worth disturbing his enjoyment of the battle for such a small thing. He shrugged, departing through the metal door, which locked itself behind him with a solid 'clunk'.

On returning to the wasteland, the Little Alien repeated the simple ceremony with the other two spirits and then welcomed them in the same fashion. The Tutor he found in a large, cluttered room that might have been part of an old stately home, or even a castle. Papers, bits of machines and general bric-a-brac lay everywhere, but the Tutor seemed happy. He bustled around, inspecting things, before sitting down at a large table to write in an old book. The Pilot, much to his own surprise, found himself quartered in a workshop equipped with drills, saws, lathes and even a small furnace. The Little Alien, however, was taken aback by one particular detail – so much so that he momentarily forgot his manners.

"I thought that you'd be able to appear however you wanted here," he said, "Why are you missing an arm?"

"I'm not sure," replied the Pilot, "I guess it's just been such a long time that I've forgotten what it was like."

He looked around his new home, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Maybe that's why I'm in this workshop. Maybe I should make a new arm for myself."

The Little Alien said that this sounded like an excellent idea. He chatted to the Pilot a while longer and turned to go, but not before he asked one last question.

"What do you think of the Poet?"

The Pilot thought a while on this before answering.

"He pretends to be carefree, and I think that he genuinely enjoys acting the clown – he certainly enjoys annoying the Captain – but he's been hurt very deeply by his failure to help the King. I've seen him sometimes, when he thinks no one is looking, staring into the wall of fire. I think that if he stays in the wilderness too much longer, he won't be able to stop himself from walking into those flames."

"What would happen to him then?" asked the Little Alien, wide-eyed at the thought.

"Many spirits have gone into the flames," answered the Pilot, "Not one has returned."

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## Chapter 12: Overload

The Poet was waiting when the Little Alien returned from his gateway. He looked, as far as it was possible to tell, a little concerned.

“How do you feel?” he asked, “Maybe you’d better sit down for a while.”

The Little Alien did feel quite tired and also slightly dizzy, but he was determined not to let it show. He had one more thing to do before he left the penumbra and returned to the village – hopefully, for a well-earned rest.

“I want you to come with me,” he said, looking the Poet straight in the eye, “You’ve really helped me here, with your good advice and ... and ... and your good company.”

The Little Alien struggled to find the right words to continue, and the Poet himself was now looking quite flustered. He was almost like a trapped animal, his gaze flitting between the Little Alien and the wall of flame. With the Pilot’s words still ringing in his ears, it was now easy to see the mesmerising hold that the fire had over the Poet. This alone gave the Little Alien the determination to continue.

“I had hoped that you might teach me to write poetry,” he said, “Please say you’ll come.”

The Poet continued to glance back and forth to the flames until his eyes suddenly stopped and fixed themselves on the Little Alien’s face. It was as if he were seeing that face for the first time, and it seemed to shock him a little. He even gave a small gasp but quickly recovered himself. The carefree clown was now gone, and rising to his full height, the Poet gave a low and gracious bow.

“It seems I have spent so long staring at the flames that I have ignored other possibilities,” he said, “It is not wise to constantly dream of ‘maybe’ and ‘one day’ while neglecting the certainty of what can be done today.”

The Poet paused slightly. Kneeling down, he opened his mouth to agree to come on the mission, but just at that moment, the Little Alien was struck by a wave of tiredness, and he staggered. Immediately, the Poet started to stand.

“You cannot carry me. You have already given over as much of your mind as is safe.”

Seeing his chance slipping away, the Little Alien made a sudden and foolish decision. Without waiting for permission, he placed his tentacle on the Poet’s head and wished for the spirit to join him.

“It’s my mind,” he said, “and I might fail without you.”

This time, however, the transfer was not easy. In fact, it caused the Little Alien a lot of pain. The Poet, at first, seemed to be resisting the process – only submitting after a short but intense battle of wills. After it was over, there was nothing but tiredness. The Little Alien tried to speak, but he could only make strange slurred sounds. He tried to walk but seemed unable to send the right signals to his legs. He tried to go to his gateway, but his mind was in turmoil, and he could not find the stillness he needed to make the transition. From all directions, he could now see spirits approaching and surrounding him. It was like being wrapped in shadows, and his vision narrowed until he was looking at the world through a long, dark tunnel. Distantly, he realised that he was going to pass out. His last thought forced

a cry of dismay from his lips – had the Poet made the transfer safely, or had his rash action caused something terrible to happen?

In his dreams, he was in a vast castle, with doors and stairs everywhere. The layout was unfamiliar and very confusing – it almost seemed like it was changing when his back was turned. Fortunately, Xeno was with him, guiding him – sometimes carrying him – through the passageways and rooms. Down they went, always down, until they reached a chamber that was half castle and half cave. Built into one side of this chamber was an ancient stone archway. Despite the fact that the Little Alien had never seen it before, it looked – and felt – very familiar. Xeno took him to the arch, and together, they went through. For a while, there was blackness, a peaceful feeling of floating in nothing, until ...

“Good morning, sleepy head,” said a familiar voice.

The Little Alien slowly opened his eyes, to see Squidge looking down at him with a smile on his face.

“Good morning,” said the Little Alien, or that was what he tried to say. His mouth was so dry that it was difficult to speak. He swallowed several times and tried again.

“Did I oversleep? What time is it? Have I missed the ceremony?”

“You went to the ceremony. Don’t you remember?” said Squidge, looking a little concerned, “You’ve been asleep for two days now – ever since Xeno brought you back from the penumbra.”

Slowly the memories started to float back, piece by piece, making the Little Alien more and more agitated. He tried to sit up but found that he was very weak. Squidge helped him, propping him up on pillows and holding a cup of water to his lips so that he could drink. The water tasted fabulous, but it could not stop the feeling of panic that was rising in the Little Alien’s gut.

“The Poet,” he said, as Squidge placed the cup back on his bedside table, “What happened to the Poet?”

“I’d better go and get Xeno to explain,” said Squidge. Then, seeing the look of concern on his friend’s face, he continued, “Don’t worry, everything’s okay. It’s just that Xeno can explain better than me. I’ll get you some food as well. You must be famished.”

Squidge got up to leave but paused at the door to add proudly: “They let me use the repomat now. I’m getting quite good at it.”

After Squidge left, the Little Alien must have drifted off again. He was awakened by the touch of a tentacle on his forehead, and he opened his eyes to see Xeno looking concerned, relieved and slightly cross, all at the same time.

“Hello, young one,” he said, “You’ve had us all very worried, you know, but it’s good to see you awake and alert again.”

The Little Alien felt anything but alert – he could quite easily have fallen asleep again – but he was glad to see Xeno, even if he still felt annoyed by the elder’s behaviour at the ceremony.

“You pushed me,” he said sulkily, “You pushed me into the penumbra.”

Xeno looked a little uneasy at being greeted like this.

“Ah, yes ... sorry about that,” Xeno stumbled over his words as he tried to find the right way to express himself, “Every now and again, you see, we all need a little push to be able to take the next step – and you have just taken such a giant step. How do you feel? What do you remember?”

“I remember taking the Poet into my mind ... or trying to,” said the Little Alien, and his concern now blocked out everything else, “How is he? Did the transfer work?”

“The Poet is fine,” said Xeno, with a faint smile, “They are all fine, but for now your spirits are ... sleeping. I asked them to sleep while you recovered.”

“How long will that take?” asked the Little Alien, “When can I talk to him ... to all of them?”

As if on cue, Squidge arrived back carrying a large bowl of broth. The aroma of the food filled the hut, making the Little Alien feel very hungry and reminding him that it must have been a full three days since his last meal.

“You should eat now and then sleep again,” said Xeno, “Sleep is the great healer. Your mind is like a vast mansion, and up to now, you have been living in just a few rooms. Now those rooms have been filled up with your new guests. It’s no wonder that you’re feeling a little squashed and squeezed. As you sleep, your mind will open up and prepare new rooms, and there will be plenty of space for everyone. Once that happens you will start to feel better ... I can see that it’s working already.”

Lured by the delicious smell, the Little Alien had curled his tentacle around the bowl of broth and raised it to his lips. It tasted so wonderful that he almost drained it in one gulp.

“Shall I get some more?” asked Squidge.

The Little Alien was about to say yes, but Xeno interrupted.

“No. No. That’s enough for now,” he said, “and enough is as good as a feast.”

They left him to sleep, Squidge clearing the bowl and waving goodbye from the doorway. The Little Alien sank back into the pillows and was snoring almost as soon as his eyes closed. It felt like only a few seconds later that he woke with a start to find a shadowy figure standing over his bed.

“Captain, is that you?” mumbled the Little Alien, fighting his way up through layers of sleep.

The figure reached out a tentacle and twitched the curtains, letting a little light into the room. It was Altus.

“Four, eh?” was all he said at first, his stern eyes staring down.

“Yes, sir,” answered the Little Alien, not sure what was expected of him.

Altus grunted.

“I expect they told you that I only managed three on my first trip?”

The Little Alien nodded, feeling quite uncomfortable with the conversation.

“Of course, *I* didn’t have to be rescued,” continued Altus, “but still, quite an impressive feat for a youngster.”

This made the Little Alien remember a question he had wanted to ask.

“How did I get back ... from the penumbra, I mean?”

“Didn’t Xeno tell you?” asked Altus, “No, I suppose he was too modest, but I don’t see why I shouldn’t fill in the gaps. Yes?”

The Little Alien nodded and remembered to whisper ‘please’, so Altus continued.

“You were taking so long in there that most of the elders had returned to the upper layer - we don’t like to stay down with the fire for too long – but Xeno wanted to see everything you did. He was watching when you fell. The spirits tried their best to catch you, and they do have a little substance to them – at least, enough to break your fall. Beyond that, however, they were powerless to help. Fortunately, Xeno was through the barrier in a second and by your side in three, but then he found he had a problem. Anyone on the bottom layer is trapped in the penumbra – the force-wall only works one way, and there is no way out through the flames.”

Even Altus shuddered at this thought, and he paused for a second before shaking his head and continuing.

“You have to go to the top layer to get out, and you can only do that by going to your gateway.”

“I tried to go there,” interrupted the Little Alien, his head buzzing, “but I couldn’t, and then I passed out.”

“And Xeno couldn’t wake you, which is why he had to be so very clever.”

Altus stopped here and simply stared at the wall. He was quiet for so long that the Little Alien got bored of waiting.

“What did he do?”

“Well, he entered your dreams,” said Altus with a slight shake of his head, “which is a very difficult and dangerous thing to do. Then he brought you into his own gateway. Do you remember?”

“I was in a huge castle,” said the Little Alien, “Xeno was guiding me – almost carrying me.”

“Just so,” said Altus, “But I wouldn’t tell anyone else about that castle. Everyone’s gateway is different, and most of us regard it as a very private place. Xeno did what he did because there was no choice. You needed medical attention immediately. Even a few minutes more and it would have been too late. You owe him your life.”

These last words hung large in the air, and Altus shuffled a little, feeling that he might have been overly dramatic. The silence lasted until Squidge arrived with another bowl of broth, providing Altus with an excuse to exit. He paused at the door on his way out.

“Eat and then rest again. Tomorrow we shall reawaken the spirits you carry, so you can start to plan your journey.”

The next morning, the Little Alien woke up to find himself alone again in the hut. Squidge had evidently already got up and gone out, but there were still some friends about. Sat on a small table in a corner of the hut was the bug house. The Little Alien got out of bed, feeling a bit wobbly at first, and knocked gently at the bugs’ front door.

“Who is it?” called several squeaky voices in unison.



“It’s me. I just came to see if you were okay.”

“We’re okay,” said the bugs, “just tired. We’ve been practising going out in the light. It’s been really hard, but now we can go outside at night ... if it’s cloudy.”

They gave a huge collective yawn.

“Look, we don’t mean to be rude, but please could you let us sleep.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later,” said the Little Alien, and he headed off to get some breakfast.

As soon as he stepped outside the door, he noticed how clean and tidy the village looked, but during the short walk to the colonnade, he became aware of something even more remarkable. Everything and everyone was the same as before, but now all the elders seemed more, well, *interested* in him. Most simply gave him a glance as he passed, but some actually nodded a hello.

Squidge was waiting for him when he got to the dining area. Breakfast seemed to be over, but the little chap ran off to prepare something for his friend. The Little Alien could not identify the dish that Squidge brought back, but it was delicious, and once again he found himself marvelling about this sudden mastery of the repomat. He was about to ask how it had happened when Xeno arrived.

“Hello, youngster,” he said, obviously considering it too late for a good morning, “I’m glad to see you up and about. When you’ve finished your breakfast, Altus has asked me to help you wake up your guests.”

It did not take long for the Little Alien to finish. The fresh air had sharpened his appetite, and the sun was already high in the sky, making him feel like he had already wasted the best part of the day. Soon he found himself sitting comfortably in the shade of a tree, with Xeno sitting opposite him and Squidge hopping around impatiently nearby.

“Why can’t we go and play, rather than doing all this boring stuff?” he complained, “I haven’t had anyone to play with for days.”

“We can play later,” replied the Little Alien, “Now I have to go and visit my new guests.”

He did not mean it to sound as dismissive as it did, and he really believed that he would soon have time to play, but Squidge suddenly seemed deflated. Fortunately, Xeno stepped in to recover the situation.

“You could do some carpentry while you’re waiting for your friend to finish,” he said, “Didn’t you say that you were going to build a bed for Altus?”

Squidge seemed to think that this was a good idea, and he headed off across the village with a spring in his step.

“Now we can have some peace and quiet,” said Xeno, smiling, “and Altus may get his bed a bit sooner.”

There was a pause, and the insects of the forest, warmed by the late morning sun, seemed to fill the air with their buzzing.

“Thank you for saving me,” blurted out the Little Alien. Then he looked down at the ground, embarrassed. Xeno placed a gentle tentacle on his shoulder.

“You’re very welcome,” said the elder, “but it was the least I could do. After all, I did push you in there in the first place.”

The Little Alien looked up and found that Xeno was smiling at him. It seemed, in that moment, that the two of them understood each other perfectly – despite the thousands of years between them – and the Little Alien smiled back.

“Now,” said Xeno, breaking the spell, “we’re going to wake up your guests. When you are ready, I’d like you to go to your gateway and choose who you will wake first.”

“The Poet,” said the Little Alien, without hesitation.

“Very well,” said Xeno, nodding slightly, “but wake only him, and then come straight back here. We must proceed slowly and carefully.”

The Little Alien closed his eyes and relaxed. Once again, the buzz of insects became the buzz of fireflies, and he opened his eyes to find himself in the garden of doorways. It took a brief search, but soon he identified the Poet’s door – a rather scuffed wooden door, unpainted and with a look that was shabbily grand. After knocking gently and receiving no reply, he took a deep breath and entered.

On the other side of the door was a single room. It was large, without being cavernous. Once upon a time, it would probably have been quite splendid – a room fit for a lord of the olden days. Now, however, it felt somewhat neglected. The woodwork needed a polish, the wallpaper was worn thin and the paint was flaking. Despite all this, the room managed to feel cosy – lived in – rather than derelict. There were no windows and only two pieces of furniture – a table, which was heaped with papers, and a high-backed chair. The table faced a fireplace, within which burnt a fire. Not a normal fire, the Little Alien noticed with a shudder, but the same flames that surrounded the wasteland, and they burnt with the same silent malice here as they had outside.

The Poet himself was asleep in the chair, his body slumped across the desk, a pen in his hand and his cheek pressed against a piece of paper – on which was written a half-finished poem. The Little Alien gingerly touched his arm and, when there was no response, shook his shoulder. The Poet jerked awake, sitting up and staring left and right, trying to figure out where he was. Then he saw the Little Alien.

“What have you done?” he shouted, suddenly quite angry, “Don’t you know what could have happened? How could you have been so irresponsible?”

The Poet was now standing, and he grasped the Little Alien by the shoulders, shaking him as if to emphasise each word.

“You might have been killed. And for what? For the company of a worthless poet?”

With each shake, however, the Poet’s anger seemed to lose some of its ferocity. It slowly dawned on him that he could touch and move things here – an experience he had not had for thousands of years. He sat back down, looked around and reached out to pick through one of the piles of paper on the table.

“All my poems,” he whispered, “All the ones I never wrote down. They’re all here. Maybe I can finish ...”

The Poet’s voice trailed off into silence, and his face snapped back into the stern mask of a disappointed school teacher as his eyes returned to the Little Alien.

“Don’t think this changes anything. I’m still angry at your recklessness, but ...” the merest trace of a smile now broke through the hardness of the Poet’s features, “but thank you for bringing me here.”

The Little Alien returned to Xeno, after promising to the Poet that he would be back soon. Xeno checked him thoroughly with a medical device and said that it would be okay for him to wake another guest. The Pilot was next in line, and after that, the Tutor. Each time, the Little Alien returned to Xeno to be checked over and cleared to continue. Finally, he returned to his gateway and stepped through the armoured door that led to the hill and the battlefield. The Captain was lying on the grass, covered by a rough blanket and with his jacket folded up for a pillow. Here and there, around the summit of the hill, were little groups of rabbits. Some were lying in the sunshine, some were nibbling on the lush, green grass and some were hopping around in play. The scene looked quite calm to the Little Alien until he saw what had happened to the battle below.

Where before there had been orderly formations of troops and a clear pattern of movement, now there was a random picture of chaos. Soldiers from both sides were spread across the valley. Many were still fighting, in small groups or heroic single combat, but a large number were sitting down clutching their ankles or hopping in retreat. It was impossible to tell who was winning or how the battle might end. Turning his back on all this confusion, the Little Alien bent to wake the Captain. As he gently shook the man’s shoulder, he was aware of the rabbits hurrying to hide themselves, so that when the Captain opened his eyes, there were none to be seen.

“Good morning,” said the Little Alien, “Sorry to disturb your sleep, but I’m going to need your help with some planning.”

“That’s quite alright,” said the Captain, sitting up and rubbing his eyes, “I’d much prefer a spot of planning to the awful dream I just had. There were rabbits everywhere. It was really quite upsetting.”

The Little Alien helped the Captain to his feet and guided him towards a large tent that stood nearby, being careful not to let him see the chaos on the battlefield. Inside was a large blackboard and a long, broad table, which was spread with maps, some pens and various papers. There were also two camp chairs. A tray containing a light breakfast had been placed between these, balanced on a folding stand. The Captain sat down and started to eat, while the Little Alien remained standing, examining the map on the table.

“So,” the Captain had finished eating and now held a cup of tea in his hand – a surprisingly delicate cup, the Little Alien thought, “if you could run me through the details, just to make sure I have all the information, I’ll start the plan.”

The Little Alien told the Captain everything he knew about the mission. It did not take long, and he was soon back with Xeno. The lack of detail had not bothered the Captain. He seemed to like the challenge that this presented. When the Little Alien left, he had been scribbling furiously on a blackboard, one of the delicate teacups perched nearby and looking quite out of place amongst the austere military surroundings.

“How do you feel?” asked Xeno as he ran the medical scanner over the Little Alien’s head and body for what must have been the tenth time.

“Okay,” came the answer, “A little tired, but okay.”

“No headache, blurred vision, unexplained pains?”

“Nope”

Xeno sighed and put the device away.

“Well, your brain function has definitely increased,” he said, “Not by a huge amount, but just about enough to accommodate your guests. Your brain will continue to adapt. It’s just going to be a tight squeeze up there for a few weeks.”

The Little Alien was not sure what was expected of him, so he just nodded. Then he had a thought.

“I’d better go and find Squidge. He needs to prepare for the journey,” then, after another pause, “Can I take Squidge to my gateway? Can he meet my guests?”

At the mention of Squidge’s name, Xeno stiffened and began to look nervous, almost as if he were caught in a trap.

“What is it?” asked the Little Alien, “What’s wrong with Squidge?”

“There’s nothing wrong with Squidge,” answered Xeno quickly.

Then he sighed, and his shoulders drooped.

“Squidge can’t go with you on your mission.”

Although the sun was now high in the sky, the Little Alien felt as if he had been dropped into a pool of freezing water.

“What do you mean?” he asked, “Why not?”

Xeno placed a tentacle gently on the Little Alien’s shoulder and gave him a look of true compassion.

“Squidge is, or he was intended to be, a toy. I know he has become much more than that, but he was never built to be anything more than a child’s plaything.”

“He’s more than that to me,” said the Little Alien, “He’s my companion, my friend.”

“He is,” answered Xeno, “but that doesn’t change the fact that he has a very short lifespan. Squidge will be lucky if he lives to be a hundred. Your journey will likely be a long one. It would be cruel to make him live the few years of his short life on board a spaceship.”

“I wouldn’t make him,” interrupted the Little Alien, “He’d be glad to come along. He’d want to.”

“And what about you?” asked Xeno gently, “How would you feel, saying goodbye to your friend in the middle of deep space, knowing you still had years to travel and that he would never see another planet?”

“I won’t leave him. I won’t! I won’t!”

The Little Alien realised how childish he sounded, but the emotion was too strong - too raw - for him to control. He felt tears welling up inside, and not wanting Xeno to see him cry, he got up and ran into the forest.

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## Chapter 13: Journey's Beginning

Now that he had seen the flames with his own eyes, the forest seemed different to the Little Alien. Everything felt less real – as if it were scenery for a play - and he was sure that he could feel the prickle of fire on his skin. Nevertheless, he walked on for a while, just long enough for his tears to dry, and then he turned back towards the village. By coincidence, he arrived at precisely the spot where Squidge was working. The little fellow was busy with his carpentry, entirely absorbed in what he was doing. The Little Alien stopped before emerging from the trees, not wanting to disturb his friend. Now he realised that Xeno was right. He could not – he must not – let Squidge waste what was left of his short life on a journey into deep space. Squidge could have a much better life here, in the village, where he was quickly becoming part of the community. So, the Little Alien did not leave the forest just then. He did not go to play with his friend. Instead, he went to his gateway to plan for the journey he now knew he must make alone.

When the Little Alien arrived back, the Captain's tent was cluttered with people, maps, diagrams and debate. The Captain had invited all the other spirits to a conference, and now they were crowded round the big table, discussing all the different details of the plan. The Little Alien was welcomed enthusiastically, and everyone looked at the Captain as they expected him to conduct the briefing. He cleared his throat, about to begin, then paused as he fought to control a quiver in his upper lip. With a great effort, the lip was stilled, and the Captain started.

"We broke the overall objective down into a small number of manageable tasks," he said in a strong and confident voice, "each of which is represented by one of these items."

The Captain indicated the large table, on which stood various objects: a small statue; a toy spaceship; a music box; a snow globe; a short, thin stick. The Little Alien wondered what it all might mean. He was impatient to get to the plan.

"First, we have the striding man," the Captain picked up the small statue, "This is the journey we must make from the village to the Garrick Mountain Spaceport. Next, we have the generation ship," he indicated the toy, "We must find this ship, board it and make it spaceworthy. Then we have-

The Captain stopped in mid-sentence, his hand reaching for the music box, but his eyes fixed on the entrance to the tent. The wind had blown the flap open to reveal the battlefield outside. The lip quivered. The Captain fought again to control it, but this time it was no good.

"They've ruined everything," he cried, heading for the door. His face was a mask of sorrow, but his eyes showed a furious and murderous intent. The others grabbed him and held him tight as he struggled and shouted.

"I'll get you rabbits! Just you wait. I'll skin you alive!"

Then, as suddenly as it had arrived, the fury was gone, and the Captain sank into a chair, his head in his hands. The Little Alien looked at the others, shocked by this behaviour in such a brave and disciplined soldier.

"He's been like this all afternoon – on and off," said the Poet with a shrug, "It's because the rabbits have ruined his lovely battle."

"It's not really the battle," the Captain said, his face still buried in his hands, "It's because *I* brought those rabbits in here."

"I don't understand," said the Little Alien.

Now the Captain dropped his hands and looked up. He seemed a lot calmer.

"This place," he said, gesturing all around with his tentacle, "it's all in your head. You let me come and live in your mind, but I'm the one who controls how it looks. Some part of me must have put the rabbits here. Why would I do that to myself?"

The Captain looked around, but no one had an answer for him. Finally, he sighed.

"I suppose I'd better finish the briefing," he said, smiling weakly.

The briefing took a long time. They went through the whole mission, from end to end, including the return journey. The Little Alien got quite frustrated at times, listening to all that talk when there were so many things that needed doing, but by the end, he felt happier knowing that they had a well thought through plan. Then he remembered the very first step of that plan, and his face fell. He had to pack for the journey to the Garrick mountains – a journey he would be taking alone.

"I say, old chap, whatever's the matter?"

The Pilot had walked out of the tent behind the Little Alien and had seen his sad face. His question was spoken with such kindness and sympathy that it seemed impossible not to tell him the whole story. Through sobs and sniffles, the Little Alien poured forth his feelings of absolute devastation about having to leave Squidge behind. To his surprise, the Pilot laughed.

"Never heard such nonsense in all my life," he said, "We can just pop your friend into a stasis pod."

"A what?" asked the Little Alien.

"Not many people want to spend years of their lives travelling through deep space," explained the Pilot, "and most of the time, you only need one crewman to fly a generation ship, so stasis pods were provided for the others. You climb into one, go to sleep and, for you, time stands still. The ship could travel for a thousand years, and someone in a stasis pod wouldn't get even a day older."

"So Squidge could travel in one of these pods?"

"Absolutely!"

"And I could wake him whenever I wanted?"

"Not too often – outside the pod, he'll continue to age as normal – but when you really needed him, he'd be there."

The Little Alien's smile widened, then turned into a grin as he realised that he would not have to leave his friend behind after all. The grin faded, however, as soon as his gaze passed across the battlefield below.

"I wish we could solve the Captain's rabbit problem as easily," he said.

"One miracle at a time," answered the Pilot, "Right now you should be getting back. You've got work to do."

There was indeed a lot of work to do. The Captain had made them consider all the difficulties that they might encounter on the journey and, therefore, what they might need to take with them. Many supplies, they thought, would be available at the Garrick Spaceport, so most of the packing was focused on what would be needed to get them there. Some items, however – especially personal items – could only come from the village. The largest of these was the bug house - their friends could hardly be left behind. Squidge also wanted to take his carpentry tools, which he could barely lift once they were all packed together. The Little Alien explained that they were unlikely to find any wood in space, and besides, they could only take what they could carry. Eventually, Squidge agreed that he would take just his whittling knife, so if they did find any wood, he'd at least be able to do *something* with it.

The elders were also very generous and helpful in providing items for the journey. As well as some fresh food, they were given quantities of taks. Taks, it turned out, were hard square cakes that could be dissolved in water to make a kind of stew.

“What if we can't find water?” asked Squidge.

“Well, then you're going to die anyway,” replied Bodger.

Altus gave him a stern look, and Xeno quickly supplied a more reassuring answer.

“If you break off small bits to nibble on, that's okay too,” he said, “It's just not as tasty.”

Two large backpacks were found, and these were soon jammed full of all the things to be taken. No matter how hard they tried, however, the bug house would not fit. After much fruitless pushing and squeezing, they decided to strap it onto the top of the Little Alien's pack. The cleaner bugs had, of course, immediately volunteered to come on the mission. They said that they'd never had space dirt to eat before, and having left the factory, they were eager to explore further. In fact, everything was done with such enthusiasm and organisation that, by the next morning, the two travellers were ready to depart. All twenty-four elders turned out to see them off, and Altus had one last surprise.

“I knew that this was somewhere, but I had to search all night to find it,” he said, handing over an untidy bundle to the Little Alien, “This is our only remaining bubble suit.”

Seeing the blank look in the Little Alien's eyes, he went on to explain:

“A bubble suit is designed to protect the person who wears it.”

“Like armour?” asked Squidge.

“In a way, yes,” answered Altus, “but better. It will even protect you and allow you to breathe in the vacuum of space.”

After solemnly accepting the package from Altus, the Little Alien paused in thought for a moment or two before turning and holding out the suit to his friend. Squidge stood immobile, unsure of how to react to this unexpected gesture.

“No, you should have the armour,” he said finally and firmly, “You're more important than I am.”

“Don't ever say that,” answered the Little Alien angrily, “Don't even think it. You're just as important to this mission, and you're more than important to me.”

Realising that he had, maybe, let his feelings get the better of him, the Little Alien continued in a lighter tone.

“Besides, you’re always breaking, and I don’t want to have to keep stopping to fix you.”

Seeing that his friend had made up his mind, Squidge took the bundle and weighed it in his hands.

“It’s quite heavy,” he said to Altus, “Would it be okay if I wore it for the journey?”

Altus said that he thought this would be an excellent idea, so Squidge struggled out of his backpack and pulled on the bubble suit. He did look funny when he had finished. It was like he was covered in a thick, cloudy, white gloop.

“I feel cooler,” was all he said as he examined his arms and legs.

“That’s normal,” explained Altus, “The suit adjusts its temperature to keep you comfortable. Try putting up the hood.”

Squidge did as he was asked, and the hood snapped into place, fitting snugly around his head but leaving his eyes, nose and mouth clear. Within a second, however, the sides of the hood grew quickly together, forming a transparent cover over Squidge’s face.

“Eugh, eugh, eugh!” he squealed, waving his arms about, “How do I get it off?”

“Once you get used to it, it’s really very comfortable,” said Altus, showing him how to take the hood down.

Squidge didn’t seem to agree. He stomped over to where he had left his pack and went to put it back on.

“Oh ha ha ha!” he said as he lifted the pack from the ground, “Who took out all the heavy stuff while I wasn’t looking?”

The Little Alien just looked confused, but Xeno had an answer.

“It’s the suit,” he explained, “It works with your muscles and makes you stronger.”

Not quite believing that he was not being tricked, Squidge checked carefully inside the pack. Seeing that everything was still there, however, he started to be convinced. Gingerly, he lifted it again, first with one hand and then with the other. Slowly, a big grin spread over his face, and the Little Alien, feeling the crushing weight of his own pack on his back, suddenly felt some small regret that he had given away the bubble suit.

After saying their final goodbyes, the two friends set off into the forest. The Little Alien trudged along with his pack weighing on his shoulders – topped as it was by the bug house – while Squidge skipped along lightly beside him, not a drop of sweat showing on his face despite the heat of the day. After a little while, they stopped, and the bug house was transferred to Squidge’s pack, which made the Little Alien a bit happier. In fact, a holiday mood spread across the group of travellers. The Little Alien and Squidge took it in turns to sing songs, while the bravest bug kept popping up onto the roof of the bug house. He insisted that he was sunbathing, despite the heavy shade of the forest trees.

By lunchtime, they felt like they must have made a lot of progress. Although they had been carefully following the instructions given by the Captain – always heading to the West – the Little Alien thought it was worth making a check of their position. Squidge immediately volunteered to climb a tree and get a look around from above the forest canopy. When he started to climb, he made a discovery.



“Hey, look at this,” he called, hanging impossibly with only one hand and one foot planted on the side of the trunk, “My hands and feet have gone sticky.”

Then he turned and headed upwards, with no more difficulty than if he were on flat ground. Wishing, for about the tenth time, that he had never given away the bubble suit, the Little Alien began to unpack some things for lunch. He had just finished when Squidge came sliding back down the tree trunk, looking a lot less happy than when he had gone up.

“The mountains are still miles away,” he said, “There’s no way we’ll get there tonight – maybe not even tomorrow night.”

This meant that they had been going more slowly than expected, but it was no cause for alarm. They had packed all the things that they needed for a night in the forest – the Captain had insisted. Over lunch, the Little Alien told Squidge all about their camping equipment, and having been a little down in the dumps, Squidge became more and more excited about the thought of sleeping in the open. In fact, he was now impatient to get moving again – as if this would bring night along sooner – but the Little Alien still had one thing left to do. He closed his eyes, went to his gateway and headed through the Captain’s door.

He found the Captain still in the tent that had become their HQ. To get there, he had walked across the hilltop, with its view of the now chaotic battlefield, and he saw that something unusual was happening. His other guests were busy positioning large bits of equipment at strategic points across the landscape. Closest to him, the Poet seemed to be burying a big black box near the ruins of a farmhouse. It all looked very peculiar – like someone had dropped a handful of modern characters into the middle of an old oil painting.

“Your majesty,” said a voice at his elbow, “how kind of you to come and inspect our project.”

The Little Alien turned to see the Tutor, who was carrying a clipboard and seemed to be directing the others.

“I told you before,” he said angrily, “I am not the king.”

“Of course, sire. I am so forgetful in my old age,” replied the Tutor with a wink.

The Little Alien thought about arguing further, but his curiosity got the better of him.

“What is everyone doing?” he asked.

“Our friend, the Captain, was so upset about the rabbits that we decided to do something about them,” explained the old man, “I devised a little scheme using sub-sonics, which should drive the troublesome creatures well away from the battlefield ... it will work for moles as well.”

“What a very kind thought,” said the Little Alien, turning to go into the tent, but the Tutor caught his arm.

“You mustn’t tell the Captain,” he said seriously, “It might not work, you see. The disappointment might ...”

The Tutor allowed the sentence to trail off, but the Little Alien understood, and he nodded before continuing into the tent.

The Captain did indeed seem quite miserable, slumped on one of the uncomfortable looking camp chairs, but he brightened up when the Little Alien came in.

“Ah, good, you’ve brought your situation report I hope?” he said, springing to his feet and approaching the map table, “I managed to pick up one or two things that were going on outside, but I’m not quite tuned in yet. It’s all a bit hazy out there.”

“You mean that you can see what I see ... in the real world?” asked the Little Alien, slightly shocked to think that his guests might be eavesdropping on his activities.

“Not really. Not yet,” said the Captain, “but with some practice and, of course, if you allow it, I will be able to experience everything as you do – see, hear, touch ... everything. In time, I’ll even be able to talk to you without your having to come here.”

The Little Alien was not at all sure how he felt about this. He had imagined that the spirits would always be confined behind their doors. He had not thought that they might be able to wander around his head at will - see through his eyes and hear through his ears. He was certain that a look of horror passed over his face, until he managed to collect himself, but the Captain did not seem to notice.

“Your report, please,” he said in his clipped military tones.

“We just stopped for lunch,” said the Little Alien, trying to remember all the things that should be included in a good situation report, “I estimate that we will arrive at the mountains by the end of tomorrow. We have plenty of supplies, and we are both in A1 form.”

“...and...?” prompted the Captain.

“And ... and ... and there is no enemy activity to report,” finished the Little Alien.

He had no idea why it was worth mentioning that there was no enemy activity, given that there were no enemies on the planet – or in the galaxy, for all he knew – but the Captain seemed pleased that the report format had been followed in full.

“Excellent!” he beamed, “Progress is a little slow but well within what we had allowed. No need to activate any contingency plans. Next sit rep at dinner, please.”

The Little Alien nodded and turned to go, but the Captain wasn’t finished.

“Just one more thing,” he said, and the Little Alien paused at the flap that passed for the tent door, “Don’t worry about that bubble suit. You did the right thing giving it to Squidge. He would have held you up otherwise. Besides, we’re bound to pick up other bits of kit along the way.”

Somehow, this one piece of reassurance was like a tonic to the Little Alien. He had been worried about his decision to give up the bubble suit, and his doubt had started to make him nervous about the many other choices he would have to take before this adventure was done. The General’s words had soothed these concerns, and the Little Alien emerged from his gateway with renewed confidence.

“Come on then, Squidge,” he called to his friend, who had wandered a little way into the forest and was poking at something amongst the leaf mould – probably an insect, “Let’s get to our campsite!”

It was a jolly little group that made camp that evening. Squidge seemed to grow more excited with every new bit of camping gear they got to use. The bugs revelled in the darker shadows, away from the fire, although there was some heated debate about what counted as ‘dirt’ in the forest – what could be cleaned and what should be left. The Little Alien made his report to the General, stressing the lack of enemy activity and the excellent morale of the

company. This good morale was somewhat dampened when they woke to a cold and dewy morning. The stiffness of their limbs and the dampness of their kit, however, was soon forgotten as the sun rose and they got back on their way.

The second day was uneventful. Two more situation reports were made. There continued to be ‘no enemy activity’, and as predicted, the Little Alien and Squidge reached the base of the Garrick Mountains in the late afternoon. There were no foothills. The mountains rose straight out of the forest, appearing like a rock wall when first glimpsed through the trees.

“The Pilot said that everyone arrived at the spaceport by flier, so there was no road,” the Little Alien told Squidge, “but he did remember that there was an old track left over from when the spaceport was first built. We should scout around to see if we can find it.”

Fortunately, the Little Alien was walking ahead at this point, and he could not see the look on his friend’s face when he mentioned the Pilot. Squidge felt like he had heard more than enough about these spirits over the past two days, especially about how great they were. Suddenly, Yun had a whole gang of new friends that Squidge would never even be able to meet. Having now left the village, where he had just started to get on slightly better with the elders, Squidge was feeling more than a little left out. So, it was with a certain lack of enthusiasm that he followed the Little Alien around the base of the mountain, looking for the old track, and when it became too dark to search further, it was a more weary and less jolly group that made camp for the night.

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## Chapter 14: A Mountain to Climb

The next day dawned bright and fine, which helped to lift Squidge's mood. He had also woken with a determination to show that he was every bit as useful as the spirits who now seemed to guide his friend's every action. Before the Little Alien was even awake, he wanted to have got the breakfast ready and, if possible, to have made a start on packing up the camp. Sometime during the night, however, the fire had gone out, and although it was not the coldest time of year, Squidge found himself shivering under his blanket. The first thing, therefore, was to get his marvellous suit on as quickly as possible. That warmed up his body nicely, but his ears – his funny pink ears that actually stuck out from the side of his head – were still freezing. While he had not enjoyed the sensation first time around, Squidge decided that the discomfort of the hood was preferable to the frostbite he was sure was developing in his earlobes. Up it went, and the membrane grew across his face – separating him from the world. The initial feeling was one of being trapped and suffocated, but Squidge forced himself to concentrate on the pleasant warmth now enveloping his head. Quickly, he moved to start the tasks he had set for himself, hoping that this activity would also provide a distraction from his new facial covering.

The work went well. The work went so well that Squidge found something nagging at the back of his mind – a thought that everything was not quite as perfect as it seemed. When he went to prepare some Tak for breakfast, it was almost as if the things he needed leapt to his hands. Wanting a tongue-nut, to add some variety, Squidge expected to have to hunt for one, but he immediately spotted a suitable specimen, hanging at a convenient height, on a tree just a few steps away from their camp. As he began to stow away their simple equipment, each item grabbed his attention in precisely the right order to fit the packs most efficiently. Although none of the things looked different, they might as well have been calling out: 'pick me, pick me!' once it was their turn. It was a mystery that resolved itself when most of the work was done and Squidge was beginning to think of waking Yun. He was standing, taking a brief moment of satisfaction in his work so far, when his mind turned to the main challenge of the day – finding the service road to the spaceport. As luck would have it, just while he was thinking of the road, he was staring directly up towards the mountain. Although his eyes were focused on nothing in general and he was not conscious of looking for anything, still his gaze was drawn to a patch of rubble on the slopes to the right. It was too far away to make out anything definite, but as he stared, a most remarkable thing happened. That exact area was magnified in his vision. It grew in scale and clarity until he could quite easily see that it was just what he had been searching for – the start of a track.

Squidge did not understand how, but it was now clear that the suit had been helping him all along. Some special property of the visor was showing him the things he needed to see. Unable to contain his excitement, either at his important discovery or at the seemingly limitless power of his suit, Squidge immediately went to wake Yun.

"What? Where?" were the Little Alien's first words.

Squidge had not quite got used to his friend's new sleep patterns. Just a few days ago, Yun would have been the first up, and he would have bounded out of bed as soon as his eyes were open. Since his adventures in the penumbra, however, he seemed to need much more rest. This grogginess of waking also took a while to disappear – like his friend was finding it difficult to pull himself out of his dreams and back to the real world. Knowing that this was part of the process of healing - his mind adjusting to the new burden of his guests - Squidge

would usually have made allowances for this waking period, but now he felt his news just too important to wait.

“Up there! The path!” he shouted, hopping from one foot to the other and pointing to the mountain, “It looks like it doesn’t come all the way down to the forest – maybe there was a landslide. We’ll have to climb to get to the start, but we found it. We found it.”

After wolfing down their breakfast and throwing the last of the camping items hastily into their packs, the two friends headed off around the base of the mountain to find the best place to start their ascent. When they reached the spot directly below the start of the path, it became clear that there *had* been a rockslide. Boulders and scree had tumbled down the mountainside, even into the forest, and all traces of the track had been obliterated. At least it gave a more gentle slope on which to start their climb, but that advantage soon disappeared as they got higher. With the bubble suit helping, Squidge had little difficulty scrambling up the rocky mountainside, but it was a different story for the Little Alien. Stones slipped and slid under his feet, and the heavy pack seemed to want to drag him back down towards the forest. In the end, he agreed that they should rope themselves together so that Squidge could help haul him up - like a sack, he thought. More than once, the Little Alien slipped or tumbled, but the rope saved him from serious harm. By the time they made it to the start of the track, the morning was coming to a close. Nevertheless, Squidge was feeling happy about having been really useful, although the Little Alien spoiled things a bit as they were untying themselves.

“It was a good job the Captain thought to include rope on the packing list,” he said, “otherwise that would have been a difficult climb.”

From then on, the track rose fairly steadily up the side of the mountain. There were some places where it became a little difficult to follow - where they had to scramble over rockslides or up small cliffs. For the most part, however, it was just a case of finding the energy to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Even Squidge was starting to seem out of breath when they suddenly found themselves walking through a misty drizzle. They had climbed so high, the Little Alien realised with a shock, that they were now walking through the clouds. With nothing but white mist all around them, it was impossible to tell what time it was and very difficult even to see the track. They had stopped for lunch some time ago, and it certainly seemed to be getting darker, so it could be quite late. The Little Alien started to worry that they might have to spend the night on the mountainside. They had not brought any tents so this would be uncomfortable, but not dangerous unless the weather turned. Squidge was thinking similar thoughts, and he was also nervous about spending a night in the open – even with his splendid bubble suit. They had both decided to stop and ask the other about their plans when the first flakes of snow began to appear in the air around them.

“What are we going to do, Yun?” asked Squidge, “Should we stop and find shelter?”

The Little Alien looked around and found that his world had been reduced to a space not much bigger than two or three paces. The mist, snow and general gloom prevented him from seeing any further. He was also dismayed to find that he was rather short of breath. Had they come so high so quickly that the air was already thinning?

“We must be nearly through by now,” he said, “Let’s keep going. Once we get above the clouds, at least we’ll be clear of the snow.”

This seemed like a sensible idea to Squidge. He squared himself against the stiffening breeze, pulled up his hood and continued to slog up the path. He had also noticed the thinning of the air, but he found that the hood of his suit allowed him to breathe normally. Very aware

that his friend had no such benefits, he kept a close eye on Yun, ready to offer help if needed. It was just as well because the wind grew ever stronger and the snow thickened. One of the peculiar things about being *in* the cloud was that the flakes did not only fall downwards. They moved in every direction - even being blown upwards from time to time – so that it was impossible for the Little Alien to keep them out of his eyes. He held his claw as a shield to his face, but the snow always found a way round, and now it was not just snow. Larger crystals of ice were beginning to build, and these stung his cheeks as they were whipped up in the little eddies of rough air that were being generated by the wind.

Walking like this, with his claw against his eyes, and no visibility anyway in what was now a blizzard, it was no wonder that the Little Alien strayed from the path. He hadn't even realised that he had missed the way until he was stopped by a pulling on his pack straps. Turning to see Squidge holding on to his rucksack, his first response was one of anger. He thought that his friend was playing some kind of joke, but when Squidge pointed urgently in front and the wind blew a small gap in the mist, he saw that he was a step away from disaster. There, almost at his feet, was a cliff edge – and no knowing how far the drop would be.

“I think we'd better stop,” shouted the Little Alien once he had allowed Squidge to guide him back to the road.

The wind had now turned into a proper gale, and it was almost impossible for the Little Alien to be heard above its shrieking, but Squidge's voice boomed out more clearly, amplified by the suit.

“We can't stop here,” he cried, “There's no shelter. You'll freeze.”

It was true. Now that he had stopped moving, the Little Alien was starting to shiver and ice was beginning to form in a crust over the top of his scales. He tried to remember whether they had passed any shelter – a cave or even a large bush - on the way up the mountain.

“It's no use going back,” he called, almost having to scream against the raw power of the wind, “There's no shelter that we passed, and I'm not sure we can go further up.”

The cold was now beginning to cut into his body, making his mind feel sluggish and his limbs heavy. Squidge, however, paused only a second before coming to some sort of conclusion. He unhitched their packs and delved inside to bring out both sets of blankets, which he wrapped tightly around the Little Alien. Using his hands and arms, he then scraped a rounded hollow in the hard surface of the road – the suit making the task look no more difficult than if he had been digging in sand. Laying his friend down in this little trench, he placed the packs to either side in an effort to block some of the wind and snow. Seemingly satisfied with these arrangements and without another word, Squidge disappeared into the swirling storm.

It was a little warmer now, down near the ground and sheltered from some of the wind, but the Little Alien knew that there was no way he could last the night like this. Snow and ice blew around in all directions, so as soon as he began to feel some relief from the chill, some new blast would drive through the hollow and the cold would bite into his body. The Little Alien struggled to think of what he ought to do, but his energy had been so drained by the climb that the sudden onset of the storm had left him with no reserves. Even when he remembered the advisors that he carried in his head, he could not find the stillness to reach his gateway. Sleep started to steal through his mind. His limbs were heavy, his eyelids drooped and he reached towards the one refuge that remained to him - an escape from the pain and the cold.

THUMP! The Little Alien's eyes snapped open at the sound, and his bedraggled brain tried to comprehend what he was seeing. In front of him, where his rucksack had been a moment before, there was now a solid wall of stone.

"Yun, don't go to sleep!" bellowed Squidge.

It took a second to figure out where the voice was coming from – it seemed to boom around the inside of the snowstorm as if the sound was bouncing from flake to flake, but when the Little Alien looked to his other side, he saw his friend. Squidge was standing, framed in a grey and dismal light, looking down at him and balancing an impossibly large rock on one raised hand. Without further warning, he nudged the other pack aside with his foot and – THUMP – dumped the boulder down on the ground. The Little Alien flinched as the rush of air from the falling rock washed over him, but he was unharmed and immediately felt the benefit of the new barriers. Almost at once, it seemed, his friend was back with more materials for the makeshift shelter.

"I told you to stay awake. You have to fight," shouted Squidge, laying down two more rocks to complete the walls.

With a massive effort, the Little Alien forced his eyes wide open. The noise and pain of the storm seemed far away, and he felt quite cosy in his new lodgings. Squidge was inside with him now - and the bugs. Together they were singing him a lullaby, which he thought was particularly cruel as he was trying so hard to stay awake, but whenever he tried to shush them, they just laughed. Worse than that, someone was shoving a soft pillow under his head and stroking his scales. Just like in a nightmare, no matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't seem to move, so instead, he tried again to reach his gateway. It did not work, at least not how he had expected. The garden of doorways was not there. He just found himself on the mountainside – on the outside of the shelter looking back at it. The storm had stopped, the sky was clear and there were two figures standing looking at the little stone enclosure. It was Altus and Xeno.

"He didn't get very far," said Altus, shaking his head.

"No," agreed Xeno, "I thought that he'd get off the planet at least."

He turned to Altus, and the Little Alien saw that his face was sombre but not sad. He was acting like this was just another piece of business to conduct in his daily routine.

"What shall we do now, then?" Xeno asked the eldest elder, "Can we make another?"

Altus shook his head once more.

"Not enough material. I'm afraid that this was our last chance. Once we're gone, it will all be over."

Both elders turned back towards the stone shelter and stared in silence as they contemplated the utter ruin of their civilisation.

"Well," said Xeno, his voice acting to break the spell of stillness that had fallen over them both, "I suppose we should finish things with a proper burial."

He scooped up a large clod of earth, using claw and hand together, and threw it into the top of the shelter, which had been left open to the sky. For a few more seconds, Yun watched the two elders throw more earth over the stones, and then he was back in his body. A heavy

weight was pressing down on his chest, and something was coming pattering down on his face. With a cry, he struggled to push his way up and flailed his tentacle to clear his eyes.

“Don’t bury me. I’m not dead,” he shouted.

“Ow. Stop. OW!” came the response, and the Little Alien found himself staring into the face of Squidge.

Although he was still not sure what was going on, or if he was really safe, the Little Alien calmed down enough to be able to take stock of his surroundings. The shelter was still standing around him, including a makeshift roof, which was partly stones and partly rucksacks. There were plenty of gaps in the rough structure, but where snow and wind had been the unwelcome guest of last night, now dazzling daylight streamed in. The sunbeams illuminated a cramped interior with only three occupants - the Little Alien himself, the bug house, perched on his feet, and Squidge, who was lying right on top of him.

“The suit’s got a heater,” explained Squidge, seeing the Little Alien’s questioning look, “I thought if I lay on top of you it would help keep you warm too. Besides, there’s not much space in here.”

The shock of waking now over, they both started to become more aware of their surroundings, especially the fact that the sun was now out. Moving very gingerly, Squidge crouched and lifted the stones, then the packs, from the roof. For a while, the Little Alien found the light too dazzling to bear, but then he felt the warmth on his skin and dragged himself out of the shelter to stand, squinting, in the open air. At first, it felt like the coldness inside him would never thaw, but soon the power of the sun drove heat back into first his limbs and, finally, into the core of his body. How long he stood absorbing those wonderful rays he couldn’t say, but he gradually became conscious of Squidge standing beside him, and he turned to look at his friend. There was a trickle of blood running from his nose, which was red and swollen, but apart from that, he seemed okay. Better than okay, in fact. There was a broad grin plastered across his face as he looked out towards the horizon, and when the Little Alien followed his gaze, he saw why.

The sight that greeted him was amazing. It was as if the whole world had realised how badly behaved it had been the night before and was now arranging itself in an act of apology. The sun was shining brightly out of a sky of clear, deep blue. Looking down, the Little Alien could see the tops of the clouds stretching out into the distance, broken here and there by mountain peaks – islands in an ocean of white. Even more glorious was the view when he looked up. Not far above them, built directly into the top of the mountain, was the spaceport. On the side nearest, following the curve of the mountain, was a single, enormous window - long and thin. Above this was a flat area, where a large section of the peak had been levelled. If he had not been told the real purpose, the Little Alien would have assumed that this was for spaceships to take off and land. In fact, it had been exclusively for the use of the flyers that had ferried passengers to and from the city. Access to spaceships was provided in a very different way, and the Little Alien’s heart was hammering hard as he looked for evidence that this form of transport was still in operation. He scanned the sky above the spaceport, and he felt a jolt of joyous relief when he saw the tether. Almost transparent, except for occasional ripples of silver energy, this ribbon reached from the mountaintop all the way up into orbit. If it had not been operating, there would have been no way to get to the generation ship – just like in his dream, the mission would have been over before it had begun.

“Yun ... Yun, are you okay?”



Squidge's voice brought the Little Alien back into the moment, and he turned to face his friend. The grin had vanished, replaced by a look of concern that seemed to be etched into the pink face.

"I'm fine ... now I'm warmed up properly," he answered, "Thank you for saving me. I wouldn't have made it through that storm without your quick thinking."

The thanks was given naturally, genuinely and without hesitation, and it caught Squidge a little by surprise. He looked at the ground and then back at the shelter before he found the right words for his reply.

"Thank you for letting me have the suit. I think I'm getting quite attached to it."

"And I'm sorry about your nose," continued the Little Alien, taking his turn to be embarrassed, "I was having this really awful dream."

Squidge waved a hand to show that it was all forgotten, he did not get a chance to say anything because another urgent thought had jumped into the Little Alien's head.

"What about the bugs?" he cried, rushing over to the shelter and lifting the wooden house carefully into the sun.

Squidge came over as well, and with shared concern, they tapped lightly on the door.

"Hello. Hello. Are you all alright in there?"

There was a heart-stopping pause before the shrill voice of the bravest bug called back.

"We're fine," he said. Then, after a pause, "but we don't like that white stuff."

Squidge and Yun looked at each other and nodded. They'd had quite enough of snow and ice for a while as well.

"No, we don't like it at all," squeaked the bug, "There was loads of it last night, all in messy heaps, and this morning it's all gone. We don't like self-cleaning things. They are unnatural, scary and not to be trusted."

Squidge went into a pretend coughing fit to hide his giggles, and the Little Alien fought back his own laughter, but they were both satisfied that the bugs had been quite unaffected by the difficulties of the storm.

After eating some dry Tak – Squidge cursed that he had not had the foresight to collect some snow to melt for water – the Little Alien went to present his situation report to the Captain. He was not looking forward to the telling-off he would receive for having almost died, but the news was greeted in quite a different way.

"Didn't I tell you what a good decision it was to give the suit to Squidge?" said the Captain, "Now, what are the lessons we should learn from this event?"

The Little Alien was not really in the mood for guessing games, especially as he was so impatient to reach the spaceport, but something about the General's manner told him that this was a serious question and that it deserved a careful answer.

"The situation worsened so quickly that it took me by surprise," he began, "I don't think, at the time, that I could have taken any better decisions – going back down would have been as dangerous as going up. Stopping was the right thing to do."

The Captain nodded, confirming his agreement and inviting the Little Alien to go further.

“So, if there was nothing I could have done differently at the time,” the Little Alien spoke slowly and deliberately, “there must have been something I could have done before the event. I could have anticipated bad weather and made a plan for it – just like your ‘actions on’.”

The Captain smiled a tight little smile before giving his opinion.

“Almost entirely correct,” he said, “Your one mistake is putting the burden entirely on yourself. It wasn’t something *you* should have done differently. It was something *we* should have thought of and planned for. I have as much to learn as you.”

After a few more words of advice from the Captain, the Little Alien re-joined Squidge on the mountainside. Together, they shouldered their packs and started on the very last leg of the climb. Unfortunately, the spaceport turned out to be much further away than it had looked from their breakfast point, especially as the thin air made it impossible to move at anything faster than a slow plod. The sun, however, was bright, and the sky was clear, so they made good progress, and their spirits were high. By gradual degrees, their destination loomed larger and larger as the morning wore on, and it was not long after lunch that they turned a final corner and found that they had arrived.

Now, as they approached the spaceport by the long-disused maintenance track, the Little Alien’s only remaining concern was how to gain entry. He needn’t have worried. Already he could see that the path ended in a door – more than a door, it was a large metal hatch that sat on enormous hinges. Clearly, it had been built to last, and it gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. The Little Alien stopped, and Squidge stopped with him. If he was puzzled by his friend’s sudden halt, he didn’t show it. Possibly they were even sharing the same thought – beyond that door, the world changes forever. What could lie ahead? There was the whole galaxy – new planets, outlanders, the mysteries of deep space – and the Little Alien had a feeling that it would hold as much terror as excitement. Instinctively, he glanced behind him, realising that they had come almost all the way around the mountain and that he was looking out towards the village.

The clouds parted here and there, allowing him glimpses of forest, river and even the city. Ringwood itself, however, was far too small to be seen from this height and distance. Even the high cliffs where they had hitched a ride on the stiltbirds, even those cliffs, which had once seemed so immense, were lost in the landscape that spread out below them. The Little Alien wondered if, in years to come, he would look back at his recent adventures and see them as nothing compared to the wonders and trials that were ahead of him. The temptation to turn back – to return to the safety and familiarity of the village – was strong, but it felt weak and shabby compared to the promise of adventure that radiated from the metal hatch. Yun turned to Squidge, and the two of them exchanged a brief smile of triumph and also of shared decision. In unison, they marched forward to the door of the spaceport, fully prepared – or so they thought – for whatever the future might hold.

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\*\*\* T H E   E N D \*\*\*

**... but keep reading, for a sample of  
'The Twelve Labours of Hercules'**

## The Twelve Labours of Hercules

On top of Mount Olympus sits the beautiful palace of the gods of Ancient Greece. The slender columns that reach high into the sky are made of the finest, whitest marble. On a sunny day, they shine so brightly that any man who dared approach would be dazzled by their beauty. This day, however, they reflected nothing but the blood-red light of countless fires. The smell of smoke invaded every room in the palace, and the sounds of battle echoed through the great halls. The palace of the gods was under siege. An army of giants was attacking, and looking up from where he stood on the mountainside, Hercules made a silent vow that he would not let this beautiful building fall to such barbarians. Squaring his shoulders, he started downwards – calculating where best to join the fight. He saw Zeus, the leader of the gods, knock down one of the attacking giants with a thunderbolt. Zeus' brothers, Hades and Poseidon, lords of the underworld and the sea, fought back to back – together keeping four more giants at bay. Artemis, the huntress, ran lightly over the rocks, skewering another giant with no less than five arrows. The gods did not lack in skill, strength or courage, but they were still losing this battle. The problem was that these were magical giants, protected by a sacred prophesy, and they simply could not be killed.

The giants came from a time long before the age of man – and even before the gods. In those days a different kind of being, the Titans, ruled the universe. Although some of the Titans were noble and just, their ruler, Cronus, was nothing but evil. It was even said that he ate his own children. Zeus and his brothers defeated Cronus, but with his dying breath, the King of the Titans set a terrible curse on them.

“The giants shall rise and destroy you, Zeus, and all your brothers,” he said, “Even with all your might combined, you will not be able to stop them. They will have only one weakness, and you will never find it. I also make this unbreakable prophesy. It will take the strength of a god to defeat the giants, but only one with the heart of a man can conquer them.”

Zeus did the only thing that he could, faced with this prophesy that foretold his certain death, he cheated. In disguise, he made his way to the palace of the King and queen of Thebes, one of the great cities of Ancient Greece. On the very night he arrived, the queen gave birth. A prince, it was said, who would be heir to his father's throne. Waiting until the celebrations had died down and the palace was quiet, Zeus crept into the nursery. To his dismay, he found that there was not one, but two babies. Both baby boys. How would he decide between the two? Which one would grow up to be his champion? While he was stood looking in confusion from one cradle to the other, there was a noise from outside – a crow cawing in the night. The babies woke, and while one set up a wailing fit to wake the palace, the other smiled at Zeus and reached out his little arms towards the god. This was enough. Moving quickly but calmly, Zeus placed his hand on the baby's head and chanted several powerful spells. Then he fed to the baby a spoonful of ambrosia, the special food of the gods. By the time the nurse, woken by the wailing, had entered the nursery, Zeus had disappeared out of the window and was on his way back to Olympus.

Hercules was the son of a king and queen, raised as a prince and trained to rule over the people when the time came for him to take the throne, but Zeus also looked on him as a son, watched over him and visited often – always in disguise. By the time news of the giants' revolt reached the palace high on Olympus, Hercules had grown into a fine young man, skilled in the use of all the weapons of war – especially the bow – but equally at home

plucking the strings of a lyre. It was true that some found him proud, with a quick temper that often burst like a storm over some unlucky servant, but he was a prince – this kind of behaviour was to be expected. Naturally, the young Hercules felt himself destined for greater things than merely ruling a Greek city state. So, when Zeus finally revealed himself and asked for help in defeating the giants, Hercules did not think to consider himself lucky to have been chosen. Rather he considered that this was the natural order of things – that it was inevitable.

During the years of Hercules' childhood, Zeus had not been idle. Cronos had mentioned that the giants would have only one weakness, so Zeus had searched far and wide for anyone who might know what this was. Finally, from the far north, whispered stories came to Zeus' ear. Stories about a special herb that, used in the right way, would stop the giants in their tracks. He dispatched sharp-eyed eagles, swift winged swallows and birds of all types to search the air and the earth for any sign of this herb. Poseidon sent his subjects to search all the corners of his kingdom under the waves, and Hades released the demons of Tartarus to travel all the passageways of the underworld. All this activity brought no result, and the giants came ever closer to Olympus. When it became clear that the mountain would soon be surrounded, Zeus knew he must fetch Hercules, his champion, before it was too late. When they returned together to Olympus, there was no word – the herb had not been found – and the giants were approaching.

Zeus and Hercules entered the palace just as Ares, the god of war, was addressing the other gods, who had gathered in a disorderly council.

"The enemy is at our walls," he said, "Even now they gather on the hilltops around, preparing to hurl fire and rock against us. We must go out to meet them in battle."

Now he drew his sword and raised his shield, his voice ringing in the large hall.

"Let us show these giants what it is to suffer the anger of the gods!"

Hercules was greatly impressed by this speech and by the fine figure of Ares in his full battle armour. Zeus, however, had a wiser head on his shoulders.

"The giants cannot hurt us with their sticks and stones," said Zeus, "you will see that the walls of Olympus are stronger than they look. Yet, as we stand today, we cannot harm the giants. We have one half of the cure, but not the other."

Now all eyes were on Hercules. He was no stranger to the members of the council, they had each visited him many times during his childhood with lessons, or help in time of need. Now, each of them hoped that they had done enough to prepare this man for the superhuman task he must perform. Hercules, for his part, showed no surprise at seeing childhood teachers and friends now revealed as gods – for, of course, they had always made their visits to him in disguise. He simply unslung his bow and his club, and prepare to speak.

"Even though we do not have the herb," he said, addressing the room, "I cannot believe that such a company as this will ever know defeat, but if I am wrong, I can think of no greater honour than to fight and die as one of your number."

The gods cheered this noble speech, raising such a noise that no-one noticed the eagle until it landed on Zeus' arm.

So it was that Hercules was sent to harvest the herb. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, lent him winged sandals, so that he could fly. Then, the eagle guided him to the desolate

island where the herb grew. There was such a small amount, but Hercules harvested every last morsel, before heading back. Although it seemed to Hercules that he had not been away for long, when he returned to Olympus the situation had changed dramatically for the worse. So, he was faced with his choice – where to join the fight. How to help the gods, who were slowly but surely being pressed back towards their palace, and how to use the herb.

First he tried rubbing the herb on his weapons, but although he scored many direct hits on the giants, any he knocked down were soon up again to rejoin the fight. After this, he tried everything else he could think of. He rubbed the herb on himself, on the giants and on one or two of the gods. No effect. He tried chewing a tiny piece, then he knocked down a giant and put some in its mouth. Nothing. He even tried wearing some in his hair. The only thing that changed was that he had less and less of the precious herb left, and there was no way to get more. His patience was exhausted. The gods were fighting in a tight ring around the top of Mount Olympus, and they were tiring. Hercules saw Ares smashed to the ground by one giant, barely scrambling away in time to avoid its clutches. He glowered at a piece of the herb, which he held between his thumb and forefinger, as if it were deliberately trying to trick him.

“What use are you?” he shouted at the small, green stalk, “Why was I sent to the ends of the earth for you when you do nothing?”

As Hercules shouted, his knuckles grew white and his hand shook as his tremendous strength was applied to this one tiny thing he held. It was too much, and with a popping sound that seemed too loud for the size of the leaf, the herb was crushed to dust. Hercules recoiled as a thin trail of smoke curled up from between his fingers, where the herb had been moments earlier. Even at arm’s length, the smell of this was overpowering. Hercules felt his head spin and his limbs lock in place. Clamping his mouth shut, he held his breath, watching the smoke waver and dissolve into the air. Now he knew the secret, but there was so little of the herb left – he wondered if it would be enough.

The sound of cruel laughter from nearby made him put these thoughts aside. One of the giants had grabbed the goddess Athene and was crushing her in a bear hug. The other gods would have rushed to her aid, but they were too busy fighting for their own lives. Hercules realised that this was now down to him, that he would have to beat this giant – and many more like it – but not a flicker of doubt crossed his mind. He raced over and, jumping high into the air, landed a terrific blow on the side of the giant’s head. Surprised and dizzy, the giant dropped Athene, who fell to the ground and stood gasping for breath. Now Hercules swept his club at the giant’s legs, catching it just above the ankles and sending it crashing to the ground. Running up the giant’s body, Hercules grasped a morsel of the herb, as before, between his thumb and forefinger. With all his might he squeezed, popping the herb right under the giant’s nose, while being careful to hold his own breath. The giant’s face registered a moment of surprise, then of disgust at the vile stench, then it froze. A milky greyness flowed along its enormous body, from the head to the toes and fingers. When it was finished, Hercules found himself standing, not on a giant, but on a piece of rock. The giant had been turned to stone and would, now and forever, be a part of the mountain.

Athene, who had seen the transformation, directed Hercules to other parts of the fight. One by one, and working with the other gods and goddesses, they disabled the giants long enough for Hercules to use the herb and turn them to stone. With each giant that was defeated the work grew easier, until all the gods together faced just one remaining enemy, the leader of the giants – Alcyoneus. Although he was outnumbered, he was in no mood to give in. Twice

as big as any of the other giants, Alcyoneus fought ferociously – sometimes even driving the gods back. Finally Hercules and Artemis, working together, pinned him down with a shower of arrows. Then Zeus blasted Alcyoneus to the ground with a thunderbolt. Victory in sight, Hercules ran up to the giant's huge head and ... nothing. The herb had run out. There was none left, and now there was no way on earth to defeat Alcyoneus.

## About the Author

Joe Corcoran was born in Sheffield, grew up in Manchester, was educated at Cambridge and now works in London. He is a devoted husband to Mickey and proud father of Toby, who is the patient recipient of many stories in the making. They live in a nice little house in Twickenham, home of English rugby and match day traffic congestion. Together, Joe and Toby wage an eternal battle against urban foxes – especially their droppings.

The income from his writing being negative and because there are bills to pay, Joe has a ‘proper’ job with a big multi-national corporation. He works in an office in central London, and he spends the time on his daily commute staring out of the train window and dreaming up new stories. The second best bit of every day is the stolen half-hour before work starts, writing up these stories and enjoying a cup of coffee. The best bit, of course, is arriving back home.

Follow Joe on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/JoeCAuthor>



## Other Books by the Author

Further books by Joe Corcoran, available at your favourite ebook retailer:

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### Bunnies From The Future

*Calling all dads! It's time for you to become the hero of your own exciting adventure. The Bunnies from the Future need your help, and the fate of all mankind depends on your success. An evil force has taken over the world - a force that only you can defeat. It won't be easy. You'll have to learn space swimming, fight killer carrots, outsmart a super computer and make friends with some Giant Redwoods – but don't worry, you'll be back in time to read bedtime story.*

*This book is packed with enough excitement to keep any child pleading for 'two more pages', but the best thing is that this is a story about how their Daddy saved the world. Just replace a few names, and hey presto, the adventure is yours ... although, I'm sure you'll be too modest to take all the credit.*



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