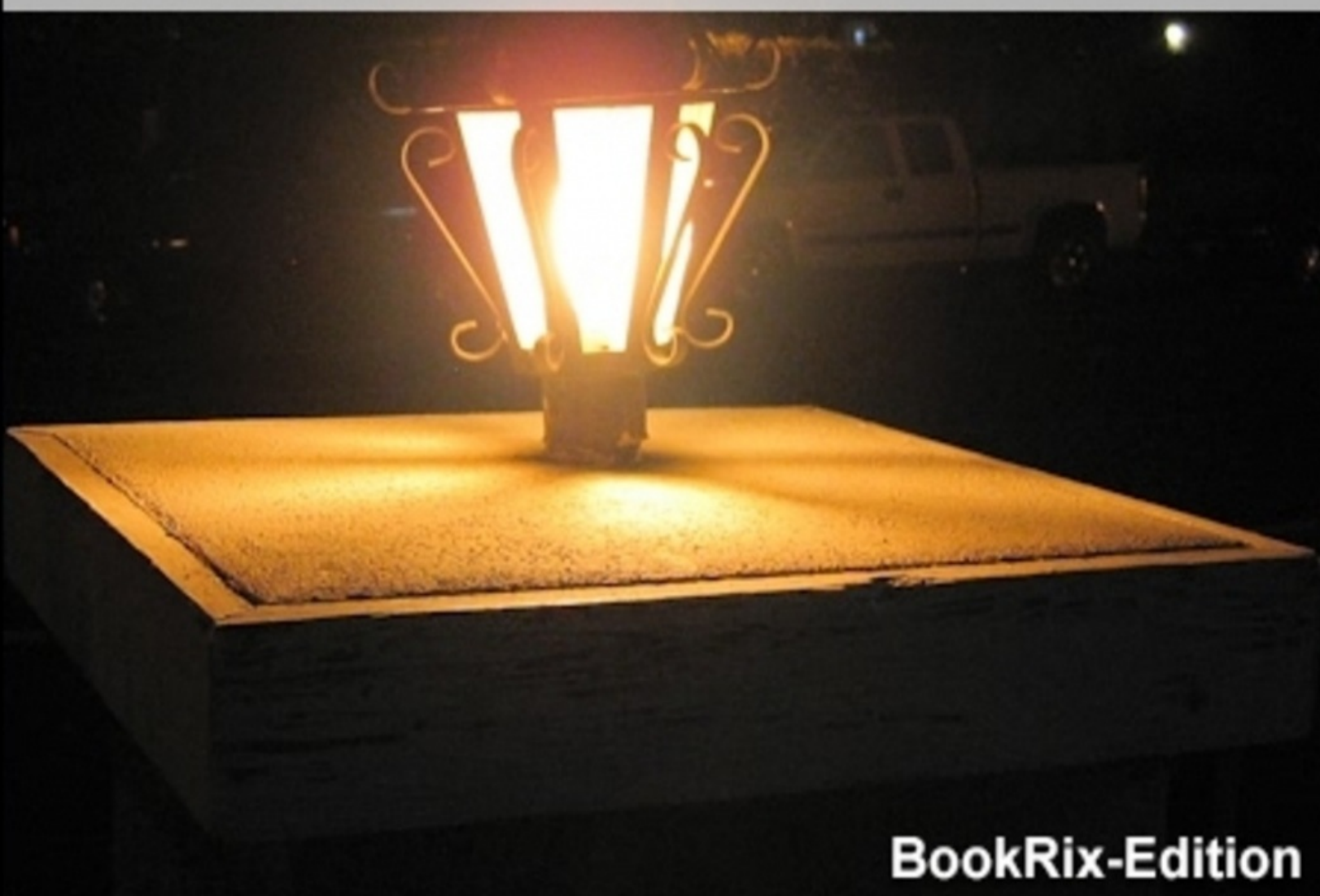


Alan Gasparutti

The Twins Paradox

Armageddon Averted



BookRix-Edition

Science Fiction

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Going Home

The Universe... An astronomically-vast emptiness... Where everything seems still and where time and space appear as one, with no end...

Within the universe are galaxies, within which are many different regions. Some contain spectacular and beautiful nebulae, formed from dead stars, and where new stars are born; while elsewhere are deadly Black Holes, where gravity is so strong that anything nearby is swallowed and obliterated into infinite density, never to see light again.

In each galaxy are millions of stars, which are millions of billions of trillions of miles apart. Some may be massive like our sun, surrounded by planetary systems. Others may be many thousands of times larger still. Also lurking within planetary systems are meteors, comets and asteroids, of all shapes and sizes.

Travelling through the universe appeared to be an asteroid, almost 8 miles in length, and about a mile across. But not everything is what it appears to be, and not everything 8 miles long is an asteroid.

The Interstellar Pilgrim was carrying over 250,000 passengers, most of whom were in deep-freeze, or hibernation, during the long, long journeys, until it was their turn to awake.

The person in charge of this current leg of the journey was Major Retono, a tall, broad coloured man, though facially he seemed Neanderthal in appearance.

"Lieutenant Jamess," he called out on his speaker, "Can you give me the current co-ordinates of the Interstellar Pilgrim?"

"We are within stellar quadrant 1, sir", said the Lieutenant. "We're still on course for our intended destination."

"How far are we from the intended destination?" asked Major Retono.

"Almost half a light year away", the Lieutenant replied.

"What is our current speed, and how long will it take us to get there?" asked Major Retono.

"We are currently travelling at warp 5," replied Lieutenant Jamess. "At our current speed, we should be at our destination within four months."

"Are there many planets or asteroids on our current course?" asked Major Retono.

"We are approaching a comet field, sir," the Lieutenant replied

"How large is this comet field?" asked the Major. "Is there sufficient space between the comets through which we can manoeuvre?"

"I don't think so sir," replied Lieutenant Jamess. "One of our fighters, or even a landing craft might be able to manoeuvre through the comet field, but the Interstellar Pilgrim is too large. We shall have to take a diversionary course. It shouldn't be too long."

"Plot the diversionary course, Lieutenant," Major Retono ordered. "When you've finished, send me a report of our intended course, together with data on any planets, satellites or asteroids we may come across."

"As you request, sir," said Lieutenant Jamess.

"I'm going to rest for now, but if you need me, I'll be in my office," said the Major.

Major Retono went to his office, and when he awoke, the requested report was on his desk. As he read carefully through it, he considered divulging some of the information. On consideration however, Major Retono decided to first discuss this with two leading members of the crew. He then called down to the lab room, and asked the ship's leading scientists, Professor Schmidt and Professor Wagstaff to come to his office.

A little later, there was a knock on the door. Major Retono went to open it.

"Ah, Professor Schmidt, come in, come in," said the Major.

"You wanted to see me," asked Professor Schmidt as he entered the office.

"Yes, sit down a minute", said the Major. "Do you know if Professor Wagstaff is on his way?"

"Professor Wagstaff hasn't yet come out of hibernation," Professor Schmidt informed the Major. "Is there something important you wish to discuss?"

"There are a few things I'd like to query with you," said Major Retono. "Do

you know where we are heading for?”

“I believe we are heading for Zorontin,” replied the Professor. “As no formal announcement has yet been made, I have decided not to disclose anything.”

“Good, good,” said the Major. “Do you know the significance of Zorontin, and it’s solar system?”

“I believe it is from one of it’s planets where we originated,” said Professor Schmidt.

“That is correct,” replied the Major. “Other than us, only Commander Ondichi is aware of this, and as you know, he is in hibernation at the moment.”

Major Retono then handed a copy of the report to the Professor Schmidt.

“I received this from Lieutenant Jamess a little while ago,” he explained.

“I’d like you to have a look at it.”

“Does Lieutenant Jamess know where we are going?” asked Professor Schmidt.

“He may know where we’re going, but I don’t think he realises it’s significance,” said Major Retono.

“Are you sure?” queried Professor Schmidt.

“I’m sure enough that if Lieutenant Jamess had any inkling, he’d have discussed it with me first,” Major Retono commented. “As I was about to say, I’d like you to read the report, and tell me what you know about any of the planets on our course.”

Professor Schmidt had a brief read of the report, before commenting on the planetary system they were now fast-approaching.

“Without checking our galactical database, I can confirm there are a number of planets, with satellites around most of them,” said Professor Schmidt.

“Do you know of any forms of life on the planets?” asked the Major.

“The planet third from the centre, ZR3, is capable of supporting life, but I am not aware of any life forms on the planet as yet,” replied Professor Schmidt. “We may have a better idea when the closer we approach the planet. As ZR3 is one of the more central planets, we may be able to detect any life in a few months.”

“But life may have developed on ZR3 since our ancestors departed this region?” queried Major Retono.

“Quite probably,” replied Professor Schmidt. “The planet fourth from the

centre, ZR4, seemed to be capable of holding some life forms once.”

“Could you elaborate on that?” the Major requested.

“I believe it’s atmosphere contained about one-third as much as ZR3’s,” replied Professor Schmidt. “Any form of life would, however, probably be primitive and restricted.”

“You mentioned some planets are surrounded by satellites?” asked the Major. “Do you know if any of them are capable of supporting life?”

“I cannot say for certain,” said Professor Schmidt. “I’ll confirm as much as I can when I’ve checked our records. I should point out that much of the information may be out-of-date. Precisely how relevant it will be remains to be seen.”

Major Retono pondered to himself for a few moments.

“I doubt anything would have happened since to change the situation, but I can’t be certain until we are a lot closer,” said the Professor.

“Is there a possibility that ZR4 may have gained a thicker atmosphere since, due to comet impacts?” asked Major Retono.

“There may have been liquid at the magnetic poles, or possibly underground, which could have since surfaced due to natural circumstances,” Professor Schmidt commented. “However, going on what we already know, these things are very unlikely.”

“I’d like to examine any planets we pass, but priority must be given to ZR3,” stipulated the Major.

“I see we’re approaching a comet field, Major,” queried Professor Schmidt. “Do you think we could we dislodge a comet or two?”

“Probably, but would it serve any purpose?” asked Major Retono. “Or do you have anything in mind?”

“I believe it may be possible to create life, or certainly improve conditions for life, on ZR4,” explained Professor Schmidt. “This may be done by sending a comet on a collision course with the planet.”

Major Retono thought about the Professor’s suggestion.

“According to my report, there is another asteroid and comet field closer to Zorontin,” he pointed out. “This one is a lot smaller than the one we are going to by-pass, so I suggest if we try something like that, we do it later.”

“We may have gained some more data on ZR4 by then, too,” Professor Schmidt said nodding in agreement.

“The last time we came this way was a long, long time ago,” Major Retono emphasised. “What is the likelihood of all planets today remaining much as they had done then?”

"I doubt any of the planets will have changed significantly, but I can't say for certain," replied the professor. "Anything could have happened in that time. New life could have developed in that time on ZR3."

"Can you look into the records of any life-forms which we have discovered elsewhere, and send me a report, with the probability of each life form developing on ZR3," requested the Major.

"It is an awfully long, long time ago when we last came this way," the Professor re-emphasised. "The same forms of life could still be there. A new species could have developed since, they could have moved on, or even destroyed themselves. Anything could have happened in that timescale."

"I know, I know," said the Major. "However, I think it best we have some idea of what we may expect. Besides, I'm going to prepare a full report on our intended destination for the Commander."

"Very well," said Professor Schmidt, "I'll see what I can find out."

"One final thing, Professor," Major Retono said to him as he was leaving the office, "Do not discuss this with anyone else."

"You have my word," replied the Professor.

Over the next few days, as the Interstellar Pilgrim moved closer to the large asteroid & comet field, it changed course slightly. As they 'flew' beneath it, the faint sight of what lay ahead could be seen. It was then agreed to continue the journey beneath the Solar plain for the time being.

As time progressed, the bright specks ahead grew larger and larger. Major Retono went to the observatory, from where he could get a close view of all the planets, which still lay some distance ahead. He decided that now was the right time to awake Commander Ondichi from hibernation.

While Major Retono was in his office the next day, reading Professor Schmidt's report on the planets and comparing the information to what he had seen of the planets, he heard a knock on the door.

"Come in," said the Major.

"I hear the mission is going well," said the Commander as he entered the office.

"Well, well, Commander, how are you," said Major Retono. "Ready for the final stage of the journey, I hope?"

"Never felt more like a final stage of a journey than I do now," replied a jolly Commander Ondichi.

Major Retono and the Commander had a brief chat for old times. The

major then showed the Commander the report on what lay ahead.

"I'm currently examining Professor Schmidt's report on the Zorontin system, Sir" said Major Retono. "There are a number of planets, but I've been giving priority to our intended destination"

"ZR3, I presume," queried the Commander.

"Yes," replied the Major. "The report is from rather old data, but from what I have observed, ZR3 does not appear to have changed in anyway at all."

"I didn't know Professor Schmidt was aware of our current destination," Commander Ondichi queried.

"I had to speak to somebody with some knowledge on the Zorontin solar system, sir," replied Major Retono. "The Professor had already worked out that we were heading for the Zorontin system, anyway."

"I presume we are the only people who, officially, know where Interstellar Pilgrim is heading?" queried the Commander.

"No-one else is aware of our destination, with the probable exception of Lieutenant Jamess, but I don't believe he is aware of the significance of ZR3."

"Lieutenant Jamess?" queried the Commander. "Last time I was around, he was Captain."

"Apparently Major Kong appointed him, after Lieutenant Kumarisarov failed to come out of hibernation successfully," replied Major Retono.

"I wasn't aware of that," said the Commander. "That was a shame – me and Kumarisarov went back a long way."

"I know, I know, sir," said Major Retono. "Unfortunately, these things happen from time to time. I only found out about it second-hand myself, sir."

"You said you've observed other planets," Commander Ondichi queried, after pondering for a few minutes in silence.

"Yes, but none of them seem capable of holding life," replied Major Retono. "Professor Schmidt's report suggested that there was some atmosphere on ZR4, but from what I have seen, most of it may have evaporated as there seems to be hardly any sign of this. It does appear to have two poles, though."

"Perhaps we may see something more on ZR4 the closer we get," suggested the Commander.

"Possibly," said the Major. "Professor suggested that we could deflect some comets towards ZR4. If the comets crashed into ZR4 perhaps the ice and other elements in the comet could eventually settle to leave water

and some atmosphere on the planet.”

“Hhmmmm,” mumbled the Commander, in deep thought. “You know we’ll have to put such a suggestion to the Full Council?”

“I realise that,” said Major Retono. “That’s why I brought this to your attention.”

“I’ll have to think carefully about this,” said the Commander.

“We have to notify the Full Council of our destination soon, anyway, Sir,” the Major pointed out.

“Do you think we could deflect a comet onto the right course?” asked Commander Ondichi.

“I think we can, Sir,” replied the Major. “Professor Schmidt certainly thinks we can.”

“I don’t think deflecting comets will be easy,” said the commander. “Ask Professor Schmidt to come to my office in two hours.”

“Yes Sir,” replied Major Retono.

Commander Ondichi then went to the library to read if this had ever been done before. There were several references to comets crashing into planets, and the subsequent development of water, and oxygen, on the planets involved. Then, eventually, there was an item about a comets being deflected by a missile into the course of a planet. As he read on, he found that, dozens of years later, these comets had successfully smashed into the planet and created the necessary ingredients for life. The explosions had also given off carbon dioxide and methane to heat the planet, so the water could remain in it's liquid form. He took the particular book with him to his office.

The commander then had a brief discussion with Professor Schmidt regarding his proposal.

“I note your proposal,” the Commander said to the Professor,” but do you really believe that a missile can be sent to deflect a comet onto a course billions miles away, and still manage to hit it’s intended target?”

“I do believe so,” replied the Professor. “Indeed, it has been done before.”

“Do you not think this may be deflecting from our intended target, ZR3?” said Commander Ondichi.

“Not really, sir,” replied the Professor. “It may be the best opportunity to help life evolve on ZR4.”

“I accept that, but have you thought about what may happen if the comet careered off course?” asked the Commander. “Perhaps it may head towards ZR3, destroying any life there?”

“I’m certain this will not happen,” said Professor Schmidt. “I will sort the missile projection and timescale, and will monitor the comet daily. Even if the comet is deflected into the wrong path, we will be travelling at a greater speed and can either re-deflect the comet into the right course, or deflect it away altogether.”

“As long as it is not directed towards ZR3,” Commander Ondichi told him “Besides, we don’t know for sure if there is life on ZR3,” replied Professor Schmidt.

“Possibly not, but we won’t have a better chance to end this never-ending voyage through the cosmos and settle down onto our own world, than we have now,” emphasised the Commander.

“There is a comet field a lot closer to ZR4 than the one we have just passed,” said the Professor.

“It may not be trillions of miles away from ZR4, or ZR3 for that matter, but it’s still billions of miles away,” stressed Commander Ondichi. “Besides, there is also an asteroid belt nearer to ZR4. If a comet hit one of the asteroids it could deflect both onto totally different courses.”

“I’m sorry we disagree, sir, but don’t forget that if we have the technology to deflect a comet towards ZR4, we will also have the technology to deflect a comet away from ZR3, should that ever be the case,” re-emphasised the Professor.

Commander Ondichi then thought to himself for a while.

“An announcement of our intended destination will have to be made to the Full Council soon,” he said. “I’ll invite you to the consultation – if you still wish to put forward your suggestion, you may do so then.”

Over the next few weeks, as the Interstellar Pilgrim was progressing closer and closer to the centre of the Zorontin solar system, Professor Schmidt visited the observatory regularly. He paid careful attention to ZR4, assessing what little atmosphere it had, and how it could be developed and expanded. He also paid close attention to ZR3, but being further away, images were rather unclear, and were often obscured by another object revolving around the planet.

It was not long after that the Full Council consultation was held. It was agreed that priority would be given to exploration of ZR3, to seek out any life forms, with a view to colonizing the planet.

It was also explained that ZR3 was from where they had originated a long, long, long time ago. Many of the councillors were excited with the opportunity to return to the planet from which they came, particularly after

all the hazards and obstacles they had come across.

Professor Schmidt gave recommendations that ZR4 be explored at some point, saying that it had some atmosphere and required a new catalyst to increase this to suitable levels. Many on the 'Council were opposed to the proposal, including Commander Ondichi and Major Retono. The support for Professor Schmidt's proposal was greater than first thought though. The idea for creating new life, and the promise to watch any comets closely, and ensure the protection of ZR3, helped convince the 'Council to support his proposal.

It was also decided to wake many of the people on the Interstellar Pilgrim, from hibernation. This included Dr Stardust, who would monitor ZR3, and Major Kong, who would assist in leading the mission.

There were pictures all around the Interstellar Pilgrim of it's people on various planets, some of which they had colonized over the millenia, and some they remained in contact with. It was decided that, some people would remain on the Interstellar Pilgrim.

As they journeyed ever-closer to the centre of the Zorontin solar system, it was ordered that Interstellar Pilgrim should slow down. Views of ZR3, ZR4 and the other planets became clearer and clearer. As they approached the inner comet & asteroid field, careful planning went into the proposal of deflecting comets with accurate precision, each to hit ZR4 on different points of it's orbit.

As each day passed, the view of the planets became slightly clearer. Dr Stardust monitored ZR3, while Professor Schmidt monitored the comets and their courses.

Major Retono monitored the course of the Interstellar Pilgrim. This included other, much larger planets, passed on the way. None of these were of any interest as they seemed to hold no hope of life. Indeed, some of the planets' satellites seemed to be of more interest.

Priority, however, was the journey to ZR3, signs of life it may hold, and whether the crew of the Interstellar Pilgrim could eventually settle there, which was the plan of Commander Ondichi.

Nightmare In Dentdale

One quiet, cold and clear November afternoon in the Dentdale valley, Cumbria, England, a young lad, darker, more and more stars appeared, with a full moon becoming brighter by the minute.

"Come in Daniel, or you'll catch a cold," his father, Peter, said to him.

"Dad, what are all those stars in the sky?" Daniel asked.

"Come in and I'll tell you," said Peter. "And close that door behind you."

As Daniel closed the door, he kept asking his father about the stars.

"They're all like our sun," Peter told him.

"Are they little suns?" asked Daniel.

"No, no, no," said Peter. "They just look that tiny because they are a lot, lot further away."

Daniel sat and thought to himself for a moment.

"Many stars are bigger than our sun," Peter told him. "Some of the stars are not stars at all."

"Are some of them like the moon," Daniel queried, trying to ascertain what his father had just said.

"I suppose a few of them are," Peter replied. "Some of them are planets, like Venus and Jupiter."

"Are they like our world?" asked Daniel.

"They orbit the sun, just like our Earth, but otherwise they are very different from Earth," Peter told his son. "If you want to know more about the stars and planets, there are a few books on the shelf in your brother, Richard's bedroom."

Just as they were talking, Richard walked into the room.

"Could you show Daniel some of your books on stars," Peter said to him as he put his coat on. "I've got to get to work now, so I'll see you both tomorrow. Say goodbye to mum for me too."

Peter worked at the military radar station high on Great Dun Fell, thirty miles away. Amongst other things he checked weather and radar reports, to see any odd 'objects' in the sky. Anything odd had to be reported, as it could be a 'Star Wars' project by China, Russia or Iran, and may pose a threat to the United Kingdom later.

That evening, Peter noticed one small speck on this evening's sky which was not at the same point in the constellation of Cepheus the previous evening. But what could it be, he thought? Was it a spy satellite? Or could it be just a faint variable star? Could it be a new and distant nova? Or could it be something hurtling towards Earth?

"Is something the matter?" asked his colleague, Jack.

"I'm not sure," said Peter. "Take a look at these pictures."

Jack looked closely at yesterday's picture of the same area of sky around Cepheus, and compared it to this evening's image.

"I can't see much," said Jack. "Certainly nothing that's obvious."

Peter then pointed to the small speck on the current skyline. Jack looked

at the image several times over, but was unsure as to what it may be.

"It's probably nothing, but I think you should report it to the Duty Manager," Jack suggested.

"That's what I thought," said Peter. "I could give her a call, I suppose, though perhaps I should go and see her directly."

"I'm not sure if she's in at the moment," said Jack. "Why don't you send a message, for now. You can go and see her when she gets back."

Peter duly sent an email, before printing the two images. About an hour later, he received a reply from the Duty Manager, asking him to go to her office. He took the images with him and showed them to the duty manager, Joanna. She said she would look at them and refer them on if necessary. Peter never heard anymore about the images for the rest of his shift, but on his way home early the next morning, he began to think about them to himself.

What if it was an asteroid, or a comet? What if no-one thought anymore of it? Was it heading for Earth? Would it lead to an almighty catastrophe? Could it affect Peter and his family? No, surely not, he then thought.

The same thoughts kept coming in his head, however. He couldn't shake them off. What if it was something heading for Earth? Could it lead to the end of mankind?

When Peter arrived home, instead of going to bed, he got his book on the universe and read it carefully. He remembered where in the sky he saw the new speck of light, and saw that there was nothing about any stars in the particular area of Cepheus in which he saw the speck. Peter wore himself out reading his book and eventually went to bed. He soon went to sleep.

The next thing he knew was when there seemed to be something bright outside. It was getting brighter all the time, even with the curtains drawn. Then he heard an almighty loud bang, as the windows were shattered with glass flying all over the room. It must have been an explosion? What caused the explosion?

"Oh my God," he cried. "Was this a nuclear bomb? Who would do such a thing?"

Peter heard some screams outside, so he ran to the window, treading on broken glass, and cutting his toes in the process. He could see houses had been destroyed, whilst disfigured bodies lay all over the place. Those that appeared to be alive were choking and suffocating. No-one was

screaming. He was getting more and more worried.

"What's happened to everyone?" he asked himself. "Where are the Police, the Fire Brigade and ambulances? How long will they take to get there?"

Peter began to remember about the odd speck in the sky. Could the explosion have been a massive asteroid, he asked himself. He'd only seen it eight hours ago. It couldn't be that, could it? He began to sweat as he became hotter and hotter.

"It can't be, it can't be," he cried over and over again. "What on Earth is going to happen to me? What will happen to my family?"

Peter began to tremble and cough, and was now struggling to talk. Then he thought he heard a familiar voice.

"Peter, Peter, are you alright, Peter?" he could hear his wife Kirsty call.

"Are you alright? Are you okay?"

Kirsty shook him.

"We're..... doomed for!" he panted, "we're... doomed!"

"What's the matter?" she asked as she switched the bedside lamp on.

"We're all going to die," he managed to cry.

"Are you alright, Peter?" Kirsty asked again, as she shook him once more."

Peter looked up at Kirsty, half-coughing, half-panting. As he looked around in a daze, he noticed one of the curtains were not fully drawn. There didn't seem to be any explosion, or even of smoke or fire outside. The windows were in their pains. Then he looked at Kirsty.

"Have you had a nightmare?" she asked him.

Peter didn't say anything. He just looked around, as Richard came into the bedroom, followed by Daniel.

"Is dad alright?" they asked their mother, Kirsty.

"I think he's had a nightmare," she told the children. "Stay with your dad for now. I'm going downstairs to make us a cup of tea. I think dad needs a warm drink, and some sleeping tablets."

"Are you alright dad?" Daniel asked.

"You wouldn't...." Peter said trying to get his breath back, "want to know."

As Peter placed his hands over his head, he noticed that there wasn't any blood hid hands from broken glass.

"It's not like you to have nightmares very often, dad," Richard commented.

"Are you alright now?"

Peter just nodded his head. He then looked at his feet to check if there was any blood on them. Once again, he noticed there was nothing, not even a bruise or a scratch.

"Did I hear you say we're doomed?" queried Daniel.

"He's probably been watching too much Armageddon," commented Richard. "Or perhaps he's seen flying saucers."

"Can I go back to sleep now?" asked Daniel.

"Go on, go on," Peter told him, before looking at Richard. "You may as well go back to bed too."

"Are you sure, dad?" Richard queried. "Will you be okay for work tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I think I'm alright now," said Peter mumbled.

As Richard went back to his bedroom, Peter relaxed for a little while, until Kirsty came upstairs with some tea. She brought a couple of paracetamols along, too.

"I think you'd better have these," she told Peter. "They should help you sleep. You're not due back to work for another fourteen hours, so you may as well get some kip for now."

Peter took his time and just sipped his tea for a while. Kirsty made sure he took the paracetamols. Peter still wouldn't lay down, and was reluctant to switch off the light at first. Eventually Peter fell asleep.

The next day, Peter was rather more eager to get to work, a little too eager some motorists might say. He got to the radar station okay however. The first thing he did was check the satellite picture of the same area of the current night sky. The small speck that he had noticed 24 hours earlier, was still there. The next thing he did was to see his duty manager, Joanna.

"Did you look at that speck in Cepheus that I showed you in last night's picture?" Peter asked her.

"Yes," she replied. "I've referred it further."

"Look at this," Peter said, showing Joanna the current picture of the same patch of sky. "The speck is still there."

"Hhmmm," she mumbled, thinking what to say next. "Thanks for bringing it to my attention. I'll refer it again."

"Have you had any reply about last night's picture?" Peter asked.

"No, not yet," said Joanna.

"Can you chase the matter, please," Peter requested.

"I can't really chase this," she told Peter, getting a little fed up. "What is the point of all this?"

"It could be an asteroid, or a comet," Peter replied. "It could smash into the Earth."

"Peter, we're not here to oversee asteroids," she told him. "I know you

like your astronomy, but don't you think this is taking things a little too far?"

"It could kill us all, wipe us all out," Peter emphasised.

"How do you know it's an asteroid, anyway?" said Joanna. "I don't claim to be an astronomer, but I know there are such things as variable stars. If it was an 'enemy' spy-satellite I could put some emphasis on it."

"Okay, do that then," Peter proposed.

"Perhaps you've forgotten, but the cold war is over," Joanna told him. "The only other power that might do something like this may be China, and they're not the old communist state they were, are they?"

"I've just got a feeling that this is something big," Peter re-emphasised.

"Look I'm sorry, but until I have proof that it is what you claim, that's the end of the matter," Joanna told him. "Besides, if it is an asteroid heading for Earth, NASA or the European Space Agency may be looking at this right now, in which case we'll hear about it soon enough."

"I haven't heard anything," commented Peter.

"For heaven's sake, what's got into you?" Joanna asked Peter.

"Can I send these to NASA or the European Space Agency?" Peter asked.

"Not from here, you can't," Joanna told him in no uncertain terms.

"Can I take the images home, then?" asked Peter. "I can send them from home."

"You know no-one here is allowed to take any data outside these premises," Joanna told him.

"I'm not going to send these to some terrorist organisation," moaned Peter.

"I wouldn't have thought terrorists would be interested in a speck in the sky," said Joanna.

"Exactly," exclaimed Peter. "Please?"

Joanna thought for a moment.

"I won't tell anyone," Peter said to her.

"Okay, okay," she said. "I don't know anything about this though, do you understand?"

"I understand," said Peter, who had now cooled down a little. "As far as I'm concerned, I took a picture with my digital camera through my telescope at home. No-one will know any different."

"Do what you want as long as it doesn't involve me, or this place," Joanna told him. "Now get back to work."

As Peter walked off, Joanna sent an e-mail to his colleagues. Peter's

name wasn't on the list of addressees, so all the recipients worked out who it was referring to. It read:

When Peter arrived home early next morning, he went straight to his PC again. First he scanned the three pictures onto his PC, and then attached them to an email he sent to NASA, the European Space Agency and the Royal Greenwich Observatory. He thought about searching for the site of the Russian Space Federation, but thought it would take too long. Besides, he didn't know Russian so couldn't be certain of the address even if he found it. It may not be worth it as wouldn't be in their native language, anyway.

Peter was tired, but pleased that he had done his bit for mankind. He was relieved and felt confident that he wouldn't have the same nightmare as he had 24 hours earlier. Then he heard some footsteps.

"Are you still up?" Kirsty asked him.

"I'm coming to bed now, love," Peter said to her, as he crept into their bedroom looking forward to a good night's sleep.

Call Me George

The following morning, at the Royal Greenwich Observatory, one of the astronomers read Peter's e-mail, and then went to the telescope to closely study the sky around Cepheus. He found the speck Peter had referred to, and checked the records. There was nothing to indicate what this may be, so after noting the data, sent a copy to NASA.

At the same time, a professor at the Guildford offices of the European Space Agency also read the e-mail and double-checked the images sent. He too could not be sure what the small speck could be, and after passing the details to colleagues, also sent a copy to NASA.

Six hours later, at the NASA headquarters in Houston, Texas, Dr Steve de Pierri picked up one of the e-mails. As he read it, he became ever-more curious. Then along came his secretary, who passed the other two e-mails to Steve. He read these too, and passed them to his team to assess.

Later that afternoon, one of his team, Robert Langman, came to his office.

"It's about those images of a faint object in Cepheus," Robert said to Steve. "We've looked at this, and all the possibilities it could be."

"Do you have any idea what it may be?" asked Steve.

"It could be a new erupting nova from a distant part of the galaxy, in which case it will diminish in time," said Robert. "I'm not sure about this though."

"It can't be a British aircraft, as it wouldn't have appeared in the same area two successive nights," said Steve. "Make sure it's checked out again this evening."

"I've already asked Mount Wilson observatory to do that," replied Robert.

"Do you think we should send this to the Space Station, and ask them to monitor it?"

"I think we'd better," agreed Steve. "We can't be sure what this is, and we can't rule out an asteroid heading this way. It's worth a serious look at."

"Okay, I'll notify the Space Station right away," replied Robert. "They'll be in a better position to monitor this from the Space Station. Let's hope it is a distant nova, or something like that."

Robert looked at the stars through his telescope that night from his Texas country home, particularly in the region of Cepheus. He noticed the same speck again. Steve also observed the same speck, which had now appeared for the third night in succession. They were both rather curious about this, and next morning, the first thing Robert did when he arrived at NASA HQ was to check for messages from the Space Station. Sure enough, there was one waiting, which read:

Robert showed this to Steve. They now knew what the speck was. When they compared the images of the last three nights, the speck seemed to be a tiny bit brighter. At least they needn't worry about the asteroid hitting the Earth, and wiping out humanity. Or so they thought.

The next morning, when Robert went to check for any messages from the Space Station, he found the following message:

"Oh my God," Robert shouted, and quickly contacted Steve, on his mobile while he was driving to work. "I've got some very bad news," he told him.

"Can it wait," Steve asked.

"Not really - it's that asteroid," Robert told him. "It's heading this way."

"What?" shrieked Steve. "The crew of the space station said yesterday it was travelling too fast to hit Earth."

"I know, I know," replied Robert. "They've now refined yesterday's report." Just as Steve was about to reply to Robert, he just noticed he was

approaching a red traffic light rather too quickly. He slammed on the brakes. His Chevrolet hit the car in front, as the car behind narrowly avoided smashing into the Chevrolet. Several other vehicles around Steve sounded their horns, and arguments and accusations were being made, mainly against Steve.

"Do we have much time?" Steve asked Robert in all the rumpus.

"They reckon it may hit Earth in January," warned Robert. "They haven't given us a specific date yet."

"Tell Professor Marshall and all the other Team Leaders," Steve said. "I'll be there as quick as I can. We may have to hold a meeting."

As soon as the lights went green, Steve moved quickly into the next lane, overtaking the car in front and then pulling away. Fortunately there was little damage to Steve's Chevrolet, or the other vehicles. He wasn't too far from NASA HQ at the time, so did not take long to get there. When he arrived for work, he read the message from the space station.

By now, Robert had notified colleagues and other departments about the message. Professor Frank Marshall contacted the space station, where it was confirmed that the asteroid was heading for Earth's orbit. January 21st seemed the most likely date. Professor Marshall and Steve discussed what to do next.

"Do we tell the President just yet?" asked Steve.

"I think we're going to have to," replied Professor Marshall. "Don't forget, the space station is manned by Russians as well, and if they know about this, which I should think they do, President Boritzov will be aware."

"We don't want to alarm anybody though," said Steve. "The message only says that the asteroid may be heading this way."

"I've instructed everyone here strictly not to divulge this information," said Professor Marshall. "The Space Station will continue to monitor the situation and will update us further. If the asteroid does not hit Earth, no-one will be the wiser and we can forget the matter, for now."

"If this asteroid is bound for Earth, we still have two or three months to prepare for the event," said Steve. "What do you think would be our best option for such an event?"

"I'm not sure about this one," said Professor Marshall. "We've been preparing Big Bessy, but I don't think she was designed for such a large asteroid."

"Do you think the shuttle could blow it up, perhaps from inside, like they did on that film," suggested Steve.

"That's something we're going to have to consider," said Professor

Marshall. "We'll have to make sure the asteroid is far enough away from Earth so that any fragments don't end up smashing into us."

"What is the furthest distance the shuttle can go to?" asked Steve. "It was never designed to go the moon or beyond."

"I know, and we haven't enough time to build a new rocket," said Professor Marshall.

"At least we have some time," said Steve.

"I don't know if it's enough to train would-be astronauts for such a mission," commented Professor Marshall. "If this asteroid is surrounded by as much debris as the one in Armageddon, I'd prefer to consider other options."

"Such as Big Bessy?" asked Steve.

"Amongst other things, yes," replied Professor Marshall. "I do have another suggestion, but someone along the line will probably say it's not an option."

"Like what?" asked Steve.

"We can't blow a nuclear bomb in space as it would require oxygen to help fan the explosion," said Professor Marshall. "We could however, send a space craft, with a nuclear missile inside, and blow it up from within the craft as the asteroid approaches," said Professor Marshall.

"Sounds good to me," commented Steve.

"We haven't tried this with a remote-controlled craft yet, though," said Professor Marshall.

"No, but we have sent remote-controlled crafts to Mars, Jupiter and beyond," Steve pointed out. "We detached a smaller craft from Galileo around Saturn and sent it to Titan."

"I know what you're saying, but this is no exploration," said the Professor.

"We cannot allow for any small malfunction in this case. Besides, we don't have a remote-control system for the 'shuttle. "

"We can build one into the 'shuttle," argued Steve.

"And how long will that take?" queried Professor Marshall. "For something as important as this someone has got to be inside the craft. Do you want to be the one to ask some astronaut to effectively commit suicide?"

"It's not just for our sakes, though, is it," said Steve. "It's for the sake of all mankind."

"I know, I know," replied Professor Marshall. "But that's a decision for someone like the President."

"I'll get onto him right away," said Steve.

In Washington, the president was in the garden of the White House, chewing a few pretzels, when one of his secretaries came along.

"I have a call for you Mr President," she informed him. "It's from NASA."

"Put the line through to my office," the President told her. "I'd like to speak to NASA in private."

It didn't take long for the President to get to his office. As he walked in, he saw Steve on his screen.

"What can I do for you," the president asked.

"I'm afraid we have a very big problem, sir," Steve replied.

"I know you've had problems with the space shuttle, and I would like to help if I could," said the president, "but if it's anything to do with the shuttle, you'll have to speak to my Chief of Finance."

"It's nothing to do with space shuttle, well not directly anyway, sir," replied Steve, "I'm afraid we've had a message from the Space Station which indicates that an asteroid is heading this way."

"Geeeeee," gasped the president. "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," said Steve. "The Space Shuttle' are monitoring the asteroids movements. If there is any further news we'll let you know."

"How much time do we have?" asked the president.

"Ten weeks, sir," said Steve.

"Well at least we have a little time," commented the President. "Do we have the resources to destroy or deflect the asteroid?"

"We have been preparing for something like this for a while, sir," Steve informed the President. "We do have some resources in place for such an event, but we haven't had the opportunity to test them yet, sir."

"Well, it sounds like you've got a perfect opportunity to try them out now," commented the President.

"The other problem is that this asteroid is larger than what we may have been preparing for, sir," said Steve.

"How large is this asteroid, exactly?" asked the President. "Have you any idea what damage any impact may have?"

"We believe it to be about eight miles in length. If this thing impacts Earth, we'll all go the way of the dinosaurs, sir," Steve informed the President.

"Geeee...", said the President. "I'll speak to my Secretary for Defence. I'll arrange for him to meet you at NASA HQ as soon as possible. You can all get together to discuss our resources and what to do next."

"My colleagues are trying to contact the Secretary for Defence and the VP at the moment, sir" said Steve.

"VP?" queried the President.

"Vice President, sir," explained Steve.

"Oh right, right," mumbled the President. "Do you know if Russia or Europe are aware of this?"

"I can't say for certain, sir, but as this was discovered on the International Space Station, I'd guess the Russian President is probably being informed of this right now," replied Steve. "Do you know if the Russians, Chinese or Europeans have any resources for such an event, sir?"

"I doubt it," the President replied. "Have you spoken to anyone about this?"

"No, not yet, sir," replied Steve. "Only a few of us here at NASA are aware of this. We've all agreed not to divulge any information relating to this."

"Good, we don't want the natives to get excited, do we?" said the President.

Just then, a tune could be heard on the President's mobile. It was a text message indicating that the Russian President was on another line.

"I've had a call from Moscow, so I'm going to have to go now," said the President. "I'm going to contact President Borisov, and I'll let you know if they have any resources to deal with this. In the meantime, keep me informed of any developments."

The President put one phone down and closed the video-link screen, as he picked up another phone.

"Hi Mr Borisov," said the President.

"Boritzov, my name is Boritzov," replied the Russian President, in broken English.

"Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Sorry about that," the President said apologetically.

"I hear an asteroid coming for Earth," Mr Boritzov told the President.

"I've just been speaking to my Astronomical team at NASA about this," replied the President.

"What they say?" asked Mr Boritzov.

"They informed me that this asteroid may hit Earth," replied the President.

"I understand that we have about ten weeks to prepare ourselves for this."

"Have you informed your people of this?" asked Mr Boritzov.

"Not yet," replied the President. "This has only recently come to light, and we don't want to cause any panic, not until we have more information on the asteroid."

"I agree," replied Mr Boritzov. "I tell my men not to say anything. You speak to UK Prime Minister, Mr Bear?"

"No not yet," replied the President. "I'd rather keep Mr Bear out of this for the time being. It's the European Space Agency's responsibility to inform him of this. Besides, I don't want to spread panic."

"I'm sure Mr Bear say nothing," said Mr Boritzov.

"It's not Mr Bear who worries me," replied the President. "If the European Space Agency inform Mr Bear, there'll also have to speak to Jacques Chalotte. That's when all hell will break loose."

"I see what you mean," said Mr Boritzov. "Do you have ammunition to destroy asteroid if it comes to Earth?"

"I'm going to send my Secretary for Defence, Fred Luddolmans, to NASA," the President told Mr Boritzov. "He'll probably take some Generals along to assess our resources."

"You not have resource to destroy asteroid?" queried Mr Boritzov.

"No, I didn't say that," replied the President. "They do have resources at NASA but we have to assess what are the best resources to use in this instance, and to plan how best to use those resources. Can you help us in any way?"

"We have rockets. We may find undiscovered nuclear bombs," hinted Mr Boritzov.

"I don't know if nuclear missiles will be of any use on this occasion," said the President. "Do you have anything else which may be of use?"

"I speak to Russian Space Federation," replied Mr Boritzov.

"You'll have to excuse me as I must go now, but please keep me informed, Mr Borisov," the President requested.

"Boritzov," said the Russian President. "Call me Boritzov."

"Oh yeah, yeah, sorry about that, Mr Botritzov," said the President. "You can call me George. It's been nice talking to you but I must go now. Good day."

The president then went to his secretaries.

"Get me the Vice President and my Secretary for Defence," he ordered.

"Mr Bilton was trying to call you, sir," replied one of his secretaries. "He's on his way here now, sir."

"I'm afraid we haven't been able to get Mr Luddolmans as yet," said another secretary. "He's in Florida at the moment, sir, and his mobile's engaged."

"Well keep trying," the President told her. "When you get him put his call through to my office. And if anyone else asks for me, tell them I'm otherwise unobtained."

"You mean otherwise engaged, sir?" queried one secretary.

"Or should that be unobtainable, sir?" queried another secretary.

"Yeah whatever," replied the President. "Just tell them I'm busy."

The President then went back to his office. He was rather anxious and deep in thought when his phone rang.

"Mr Luddolmans is on the line, sir," said a secretary. "Putting him through now, sir."

"Hi, Fred," said the president as he picked up his phone. "I need you to go to Houston, Texas, tomorrow."

"I presume it's about this asteroid," asked Mr Luddolmans. "I've just had some man from Houston on to me about an asteroid. Is it true?"

"I'm afraid it looks like it," said the President. "What's the earliest you can get there?"

"I can get there this evening, but I would prefer to take a military leader," replied Mr Luddolmans.

"That's fine by me," said the President. "Just be there by tomorrow morning."

"Is this asteroid public knowledge?" asked Mr Luddolmans.

"Not yet," replied the President. "As far as I'm concerned, I'd like it to stay that way."

"I think the Russian President may already know about this," said Mr Luddolmans.

"I know, I know," replied the President. "I spoke to him earlier, and asked this to be kept secret."

"Is Gordon Bear aware of this?" asked Mr Luddolmans.

"No," replied the President. "I don't think we should involve Mr Bear just at the moment. If word gets out about this in the UK, it will spread to France, and all over Europe, and all panic will break loose. Besides, this ain't something we need any public relations exercise for."

"What should I say to my Generals, then," queried Mr Luddolmans.

"Tell them what you have to, but don't say too much," ordered the President. "They'll find out from NASA what's going on. I've ordered NASA to maintain silence over this."

"Okay George, I'll get on to my Generals right away," said Mr Luddolmans.

The President had just put the phone down when there was then a knock on the door of his office door. It was the Vice President, Ray Bilton.

"Hi Ray, I presume you've heard about the asteroid," the President asked to him.

"Yeah, NASA contacted me earlier," replied Mr Bilton. "I tried to contact

you but you were engaged, so I decided to come here straight away. I've not mentioned this to anyone."

"Good, Ray," replied the President. "I've ordered NASA to keep me informed of any developments," the President told Mr Bilton.

"I think we should order NASA to contact you each morning as soon as they receive any update on the matter," suggested Mr Bilton. "And they should then update me each evening on the day's events, too."

"That's fine," agreed the President. "I've ordered complete secrecy regarding this. Only a few people are aware, including Mr Boritzov. I've asked he maintain silence too."

"Does Grizzly know about this?" asked Mr Bilton.

"No," replied the President. "I don't want Gordon Bear or any other European leaders to know about this."

"How about the European Space Agency?" asked Mr Bilton.

"If the European Space Agency find out they can inform Gordon Bear and the others," said the President.

"Have you put together a strategy yet?" Mr Bilton then asked the President.

"No not yet," he replied. "That's why I'm glad you've come here, so we can discuss how to proceed and put some sort of a plan together."

"I think we should continue our current schedules, as it may seem odd if we both pull out of arrangements," suggested Mr Bilton.

"Agreed," replied the President.

"Can Russia help in any way?" asked Mr Bilton.

"I doubt it," muttered the President. "Mr Boritzov isn't too sure either, though I've asked him to check on what the Russian Space Federation can muster."

"How do you think we should react, if and when this does get out?" asked Mr Bilton.

"I think we should remain quiet about this until it's all over," said the President. "That way no-one will blame us if we fail."

"I shouldn't think there'd be anyone left to blame us if we fail to destroy the asteroid," replied Mr Bilton.

"What bothers me is that the only publicity we seem to get is bad publicity," said the President

"I don't think we should worry about publicity, George," replied Mr Bilton.

"It might even do our reputation some good."

"Oh yeah, I can see them in Damascus and Tehran cheering the US and waving the stars & stripes," the President said sarcastically.

"I don't think we should worry about how the Middle-East reacts to this," suggested Mr Bilton. "Tehran would probably claim the asteroid was a missile from Mohammed, and was meant to destroy the US."

"Yeah, and wouldn't it be good if we could destroy Mohammed's missile," the President sniggered.

"Let's forget the Middle-East for a moment, George," said Mr Bilton. "If this does get out perhaps we'd better just say we're looking into the matter. Perhaps we'd better bring Grizzly' in on this, see what he suggests."

"If this gets out Gordon Bear will know anyway," said the President. "I don't think we should worry about Europe."

"I think we should maintain good communications with the media, and with the embassy in London," suggested Mr Bilton. "We can then get an early warning if London, or the Europeans, get to find out about this."

"Agreed," said the President.

"Do you think we could cope with any after-effects from the asteroid?" asked Mr Bilton.

"What sort of after-effects do you mean, Ray?" queried the President.

"This asteroid's huge, George. Even if we destroy it, there's always the possibility that some scattered fragments will hit the Earth at some later date," said Mr Bilton.

"Hhmmmm," muttered the President as he thought for a moment.

"This sound as large as the meteorite that killed the dinosaurs," said Mr Bilton. "A 100 foot boulder smashing on the planet would probably be enough to wipe us all out."

"We're going to have to divert the asteroid, and hope it doesn't break up as a result," said the President. "I think we still have some underground bunkers from World War 2 scattered about the US. Some people could go into caves, and we can then seal them off before any fragments smash into the planet."

"We could, but the people would then need cat's eyes to see in the darkness of the caves, as no light would be able to get in," replied Mr Bilton.

"Perhaps we should forget that option for now," agreed the President.

"Let's just hope our boys can divert the asteroid onto another course."

"Do you know how many underground bunkers we have throughout the US?" asked Mr Bilton. "I know I've got a special bunker."

"No idea, George," replied the President. "Fred Luddolmans may have a better idea of that."

"What's Fred up to at the moment?" asked Mr Bilton.

"Fred Luddolmans is going to be busy over the next week," said the President. "I'll ask all district authorities about any underground bunkers and where they're located. I'll arrange to send a copy to Fred's department."

"Is Fred going to Houston?" queried Mr Bilton.

"I've sent him to meet NASA scientists about this tomorrow to discuss our resources and what would be the best course of action," replied the President. "I believe he's taking some generals with him, too."

Delayed Report

It was 9.45 am at Houston Lakeside Airport. Fred Luddolmans had just arrived and was walking through the Arrivals lounge when he saw Air Commander Clint Williams, whom he had instructed to meet, ahead. The Air Commander noticed Fred Luddolmans too, and walked over to greet to him.

"Hi Clint, glad you could make it," said Fred.

"Hello Mr Luddolmans, pleased to meet you once again," replied the Air Commander. "Is anybody else coming to meet us here today?"

"Yes, I've also ordered Major General Cornelius Smith to meet us here," said Mr Luddolmans. "He won't be here for a while, as he's flying from New York."

"There's an arrival due from JFK soon," said Clint Williams.

"Oh he shouldn't be on that plane," said Fred. "General Smith is flying from New York State, Buffalo, to be precise."

"I see there's a plane' due in from Buffalo at 10.15," Clint Williams stated as he looked up at the arrivals board.

"He should be on that flight," Fred replied.

"Shall we go somewhere quiet for the moment?" suggested Clint.

"Do you know where we can find a quiet room around here?" asked Fred.

"I'm not sure myself, but there's an airport police office around the corner," Clint pointed out.

"Good, good, we'll see if they know somewhere we can wait," replied Fred. "If we can't find anything else at least we can get an interview room to ourselves."

Fred Luddolmans and Clint Williams went to the police office. As Fred was asking about a quiet room, his mobile rang.

"Hi Mr Luddolmans, it's Professor Marshall here," he heard on the other

end of the line, before asking him to hold for a few seconds.

Mr Luddolmans then asked Clint Williams to consult the police while he spoke to the Professor.

"Thanks for calling Professor," said Fred. "I'm at Lakeside airport at the moment with one of my military staff. Is someone from NASA coming to meet us here?"

"I'm about to come there myself," replied the Professor. "Are you expecting any more personnel?"

"I'm expecting one of my Generals on the next flight from Buffalo," replied Fred. "It's not due in until 10.15, though."

"Okay, Mr Luddolmans, I'll be there at about 10.30," said Professor Marshall.

"Before you go, Professor, have there been any further developments with the asteroid overnight?" asked Fred.

"There are no significant developments yet," replied the Professor. "I'm waiting for the latest report from the space station. I hope to receive it in the next 30 minutes, so I'll tell you more when I see you."

Mr Luddolmans then went back to the police office to meet Air Commander Williams. They then went into an interview room, where Fred explained why he had called him and Major General Smith to NASA HQ.

"I'm sorry sir, but I'm not sure I'm really the person you're looking for," said Clint.

"You've flown many fighters, and various wars and battles," Fred queried with the Air Commander, who nodded his head in acknowledgement. "We need someone who can direct missiles in flight, not just at a target, but at a precise point in order to get maximum delivery and effect."

"I fought in many battles, sir, but they've all been on Earth," emphasised Clint.

"I know, I know, but this is a battle which none of us have fought before and for which no-one has the necessary experience," Fred told him.

"You're probably the best-placed person to help in our new battle."

Air Commander Williams thought carefully to himself for a few moments.

"You've read all about bouncing bombs and diversionary explosions, I suppose?" Fred asked.

"I'll need to gain experience of whatever craft NASA are to launch," he replied.

"That's fine," said Fred.

"I'm going to have to liaise with NASA designers and engineers, too," added Clint.

"That's what you're here for," replied Mr Luddolmans. "That's what we're all here for."

"Okay, sir," Clint agreed. "I'll do whatever I can."

"You don't know if they have any hearing devices attached to this room?" Fred then queried with the Air Commander.

"I don't know, sir," replied Clint.

"Did you ask if they had one when you inquired about this room?" Fred asked Clint.

"No, sorry sir," replied Clint. "I didn't know what this was all about when I asked for the room."

"I'll go and speak to the chief myself," said Fred. "If there is any hearing device in the room, I'll order it to be destroyed."

Mr Luddolmans went back out of the interview room to look for the local sergeant.

"I'm afraid he's holding an interview at the moment, sir," explained the young officer at the front desk. "I believe he's with some of the anti-terror squad interviewing a suspected terrorist, sir."

"Do you know if there are any tapes in my interview room?" Fred asked the young officer.

"There will be one in the room, but I doubt it's running, sir," the young officer replied.

"Well can you make sure that the tape wasn't running, otherwise I want that particular tape destroyed," Fred instructed.

"Will do, sir," replied the young officer.

Before Mr Luddolmans went back to his room, he went to look at the arrivals board, where he noticed that the 10.15 due in from Buffalo was on schedule. He then went back to see Air Commander Williams.

"I suppose you have a mobile on you, Clint," he queried.

"Yes, sir," replied the Air Commander. "Do you want me to contact anyone?"

"Not just yet," replied Fred. "I may expect a call in the next 15 minutes from Major General Smith. Can you go and meet him. If I hear anything from him, I'll give him your mobile number and ask him to contact you."

"Do you have a picture of the General at all, sir," queried the Air Commander. "What does he look like?"

Fred Luddolmans handed Clint a picture of the General, before they exchanged mobile numbers. Mr Luddolmans also gave him Professor Marshall's mobile number.

"When you go out, ask the man on the police desk if the sergeant has

finished his interview," Fred instructed Clint. "Tell him I do not want to be disturbed, unless there's a real emergency. I'm going to contact the President now, so I'll see you in a short while."

"Sir, why don't we just exchange mobiles," suggested Clint. "That way I'll pick up any message from Professor Marshall or Major General Smith. You can call the President on mine, there's about \$50 worth of call still outstanding so you'll have plenty of time available."

"That's fine by me," said Fred.

Clint went to the front desk to check that there was no tape recording in Fred's room, and after confirming this to him, Clint went to the Arrival lounge to wait for Major General Smith. There didn't seem to be any delay as the 10.15 from Buffalo arrived on time. While he was waiting, he heard a brief jingle of Thriller. It was Fred's mobile.

"Hello Mr Luddolmans," he heard.

"This is Air Commander Clint Williams," Clint replied.

"I do apologise," said a voice, "I must have the wrong number."

"I'm at Lakeside Airport with Mr Luddolmans," replied Clint. "Mr Luddolmans is talking to the President and doesn't wish to be disturbed just now. Can I help at all?"

"Oh yeah, I'm sure you can," came the reply. "This is Professor Marshall here. I'm just letting you know that I'm on my way to the airport."

"How long will you be?" asked Clint.

"Probably about 30 minutes," said the Professor. "Where precisely in the airport are you all?"

"I'm in Arrivals'," replied Clint. "I'm waiting for Major General Smith. Mr Luddolmans will be with me by the time you arrive. Is there anything you'd like me to tell Mr Luddolmans?"

"Not at the moment," replied Professor Marshall. "We're still awaiting today's report from the space shuttle, but Steve should let us know when it arrives."

"I'll look forward to seeing you in half hour, then," Clint said to the Professor before terminating the call.

Clint then went to buy an astronomy magazine, to read about the latest news on space, while he sat around Arrivals'. He looked around regularly, but with no sign of any of the others, until he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Hi Mr Luddolmans," he said as he turned his head. "Professor Marshall is on his way, he should be here any minute in fact."

"Where's he meeting us?" asked Fred.

"I asked him to meet us here in Arrivals'," Clint replied.

“Good,” said Fred. “Has he received today's report from the space shuttle yet?”

“No not yet, sir,” replied Clint. “He did say he was expecting some report later today, though.”

Fred began to wonder if anything had happened to the space shuttle, as it was now over twenty years old. The crew had been aboard for sometime now, too, and were due to return to Earth. As far as he was aware, they hadn't yet left and were waiting for the new crew to arrive. Perhaps they had forgotten about the daily reports, and were preparing for other things. Just then, Clint thought he noticed a tall slim black man with medals on his military uniform coming out of Arrivals'. He checked the photo Fred had given him, and thought it was Major General Smith, so called out his name and walked over to meet him.

“Major General Smith, I presume,” Clint said as he approached the man.

“Yeah,” the general said curiously, and walked over to Clint, before he introduced himself.

“I'm Air Commander Clint Williams. Mr Luddolmans is waiting for us just over there,” Clint told Major General Smith, pointing towards Fred. “We'll be meeting a professor from NASA very shortly.”

Major General Smith then apologised to Fred for not contacting him on his mobile, but said that Buffalo airport were very restrictive as to what he could carry with him, due to the terrorist alerts, so he had placed his mobile in his case. They walked over to meet Fred, and while they were talking, the Thriller ringtone was playing.

“Mr Luddolmans, it's Professor Marshall. My Dodge is parked outside Arrivals'. Are you still waiting for anyone to arrive?” he asked.

“No, no, we're all here, Professor,” replied Fred. “We're on our way.”

The three of them walked towards the Arrivals' exit, where they met Professor Marshall. After further introductions from Professor Marshall, he took Fred, Clint and Major General Smith to NASA HQ. The professor led them to his office at first, and gave them refreshments, while he went to look for Steve and the latest space shuttle report. Fred then explained the situation to General Smith, and why they had been called to Houston.

“Do the Russians or Europeans know anything about this asteroid?” asked General Smith. “How about Japan or China?”

“Russia is aware of the asteroid,” Fred informed him. “We have, however, agreed for the whole matter be kept secret for the time being. We've heard nothing from Europe, nor the Chinese or Japanese, regarding the asteroid, so while no-one else is aware we intend to keep it that way.”

"Are the Russians prepared for this?" asked Clint. "Do they have any missiles or rockets that can help us in any way?"

"Not as far as I am aware," replied Fred.

"That doesn't sound too promising," muttered Clint.

"It sounds like usual," commented General Smith. "The great Satan America will be left to pick up the pieces. Just like Bosnia and Iraq. What would this world be like if we hadn't entered World War Two?"

"Ruled by a mad and murderous dictator, probably," said Clint.

"Yeah, but which one?" asked General Smith. "Hitler or Stalin?"

"I've no idea, and I don't want to think about it," Fred told them. "Just like I don't want to think about this world being destroyed, do you?"

The room then went quiet for a while.

"If it means that the US has to clean up this world, then so be it," stated Fred. "Besides, the president is in regular talks with Mr Boritzov at the moment, so if the Russians have anything up their sleeve we should get to hear about it."

Meanwhile, Professor Marshall went upstairs to Dr Steve de Pierri's room, where the space shuttle reports were to arrive. Robert Langman was with him.

"Have we received today's report yet?" he asked Steve.

"We have received the report, but I've asked that it be double-checked," Steve replied.

"Why's that?" queried Professor Marshall.

"The asteroid has appeared to change course," Steve informed the Professor.

"Do you have a copy of the report here?" the Professor asked curiously.

"I'd like to have a good look at it."

Steve presented a copy of the report to Professor Marshall. It indeed appeared that the asteroid had changed course.

"I've noted each days statistics and plotted the asteroid's course and speed onto the following graph," Steve informed the Professor, as he opened the spreadsheet on his computer.

Professor Marshall examined it briefly. Steve and Robert also stared at the monitor carefully.

"If these statistics are correct, and I don't doubt your figures, it does look like the asteroid has been knocked off it's initial trajectory," said the Professor. "But how has the asteroid changed course?"

"We've been examining this closely all morning," said Robert.

"Are you sure the space station has been sending you the correct reports?" asked Professor Marshall. "This doesn't seem like an ordinary asteroid?"

"I'm sure the shuttle crew have been sending the correct reports, Frank," replied Dr de Pierri. "Each report is double-checked anyway but I've asked the shuttle crew to examine this closely together, to see if there may be some anomalies."

"Have they come back to you yet?" asked Professor Marshall.

"No, not yet," said Steve. "They're probably looking into it right now."

"I think we'd better hold fire with announcing today's reports until we hear from them," suggested the Professor.

"I fully agree," said Steve.

"In the meantime, do you have any idea what may have caused an asteroid to move irregularly like this?" asked the Professor.

"The asteroid was approaching the Kuiper belt," explained Steve. "It may be that the asteroid smashed into a comet, which deflected it off course."

"That's possible," muttered Professor Marshall.

Steve showed the Professor a copy of yesterday's report and picture of the area the asteroid was in, and then showed him today's equivalent picture.

"You see this miniscule spot," said Steve, pointing to the picture. "I can't find it anywhere on yesterday's picture."

"We reckon that's probably the comet which the asteroid smashed into," suggested Robert.

"Are there any other odd aspects you've noticed about this asteroid?" asked the Professor.

"We haven't been monitoring this too long, but the speed at which it seemed to be travelling at is very, very peculiar, especially for something that far out," Steve replied.

"If these details are correct the asteroid is travelling many times faster than a comet at the centre of the solar system," said Professor Marshall.

"I make it that thing's moving at over a million miles an hour. Nothing's supposed to travel at that speed."

"Except light," said Robert.

"The thing is, we have the Secretary for Defence and some of his top military men here," replied Professor Marshall. "We can't just tell them the asteroid has suddenly been deflected, and that we'll call them back when the next alert comes along. They probably won't take the matter seriously next time, and then what will happen?"

"Why don't we just go along with the original plan," Robert suggested. "At this stage perhaps it's better we don't tell them anything about these latest events."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Steve added, looking at the Professor. "We've been trying to call the military here for something like this for a long time. If we can get some proper training scheme and agree to the appropriate weapon designs, we'll hopefully have something in place next time an asteroid comes along."

"This isn't something that can be rushed through in a few months," added Robert.

"I couldn't agree more, but there may not be another asteroid heading for Earth for centuries, or more probably millennia," replied Professor Marshall.

"But we can't take that risk, Frank," Steve insisted. "Minor meteors are always smashing into the planet. Next time, though, it may be the big one."

"I know, I know," agreed Professor Marshall. "But if we are to deceive Mr Luddolmans, we'd also be deceiving the President."

"We haven't yet started to assess the new course of the asteroid yet," said Robert.

"Nor, for that matter, the course of the deflected comet," added Steve.

"We won't be deceiving anyone, because we don't yet know that either the asteroid or the comet are not heading for Earth."

"Even in the last century, there was at least one medium-sized asteroid that smashed into the planet," Robert pointed out. "And next time, it may be not be destined for outer Siberia, but for New York or LA."

"If you're talking about the Tunguska asteroid, it was actually a meteorite, and it blew up in the atmosphere," replied the Professor. "Records suggest that was the first significant meteorite for a long, long time."

"What records?" asked Steve. "For how long have we been recording meteor smashes?"

"Meteor showers have been recorded for many years," replied Professor Marshall.

"And how large are meteor showers?" asked Steve. "How can we be sure something like the Tunguska meteor didn't hit Australia three hundred years ago? Australia wasn't discovered then."

"I note your concern, guys," said Professor Marshall.

"For that matter, we can't be sure something similar didn't smash into the USA five-hundred years ago," Robert emphasised. "There were no

records at that time. People thought the Earth was at the centre of the universe.”

“We may today detect something smashing into Antarctica, but even 50 years ago we probably wouldn't have detected that until the actual event,” emphasised Steve.

“Okay,” said the Professor. “We'll go along with the original plans, but I want the shuttle crew to continue to monitor the asteroid, and for you to maintain the data.”

“Fine,” replied Steve. “How about the deflected comet?”

“Tell the 'space station crew to monitor that too,” Professor Marshall instructed. “Keep me informed of the situation.”

Professor Marshall then picked up his folder and pad.

“I'm going to see Mr Luddolmans,” he said. “We can't keep him waiting.”

“What do you want us to do in the meantime?” asked Robert.

“Just stay here for now, and wait for the new report,” ordered the Professor. “I'll tell Mr Luddolmans and his staff that the report has been delayed due to some malfunction on the space station. If you have any messages for me, just text them. I don't want to be disturbed for the next few hours.”

“What about when we receive the new report?” asked Steve.

“I'll come and see you when they go to lunch,” replied the Professor.

Professor Marshall went back into his office, where he apologised to Fred Luddolmans and his team for being away, and that there had been a malfunction on the space station. He then showed them the previous mappings for the asteroid. He explained that on the asteroid's 'current' course and speed it was projected to come close to Earth. He also explained the speed at which the asteroid was travelling at and that any collision could annihilate the human race.

Later, as he had indicated, Professor Marshall went to see Steve and Robert at lunchtime, by which time the report had been checked by the crew of the space station. They confirmed that the pictures from the latest report were indeed correct, as were all previous images. This in turn confirmed Steve and Robert's view that the asteroid had changed course. They debated what to do next, after which, it was decided not to inform Fred Luddolmans and his team of this. It was also agreed that further reports and pictures should be analysed before informing Mr Luddolmans of any developments.

Fred was called away by the President the next day, and left Air

Commander Clint Williams and Major-General Cornelius Smith to work with NASA. Professor Marshall arranged further meetings over the next few days for Clint and Cornelius with a team of NASA engineers and designers. This was to examine what would make the best missile. Professor Marshall also explained that there were different types of asteroids, and that what may be the best type of missile for one asteroid may not be ideal for another type. Amongst other arrangements, engineers showed Clint and Cornelius a model of the space shuttle, and how it could be used in such an event.

Steve continued to monitor reports of the asteroid and comet. He asked Robert Langman to double-check each days records, and together they developed a picture of the new movements. At the end of the next week, they had a brief meeting with Professor Marshall.

"Thanks for keeping me informed about the daily movements, but what about their general courses," asked the Professor.

"Well, though the asteroid is no longer on a collision course with Earth, if it continues on it's current trajectory, it will still pass relatively close," said Steve, as he turned to his monitor and opened the spreadsheet.

"How close?" asked the Professor.

"About 12 million miles," Steve told him. "That's about half the distance to Venus. I would say it should still be carefully monitored, especially an asteroid of that size."

"Do you think it may still pose a danger to Earth?" queried the Professor.

"This asteroid isn't ordinary," said Steve. "The weird thing is that though it's slowed significantly, it's still moving faster than we'd expect. If it were to move within the speed expected, it could still hit Earth."

"Why should it slow down as it nears the sun?" the Professor asked.

"We don't know if it's travelling faster because it's below the solar plain," said Steve. "As it 'rises' to the solar plain it may pick up the drag from other planets and satellites. It's course will take it near Saturn."

"Hhhmmmm," muttered Professor Marshall. "I don't like that asteroid. There's something strange about it. How long do we have before it approaches Earth?"

"Six months," Steve told him.

Professor Marshall then asked about the comet.

"I've been monitoring this for Steve," said Robert, "as this is now out of range of the asteroid."

Robert then showed the Professor a similar spreadsheet, recording the

comet's movements.

"It doesn't look like it will come anywhere near Earth, thank goodness," he told the Professor. "However, there is one very interesting thing about its course."

"What's that?" asked the Professor.

"It looks as if it may collide with Mars," explained Robert.

"Let me see that," asked Professor Marshall as he went to look at Robert's monitor in more detail.

"The comet seems to be travelling at the sort of speed we'd expect it to," added Robert. "It won't hit Mars for almost a year, but my records suggest the comet is heading directly for it."

Professor Marshall looked at the spreadsheet carefully.

"It's not due to approach any other planet on its course, though it may smash into the asteroid belt before it reaches Mars," added Robert.

Professor Marshall then turned back to Steve.

"By how much did you say the asteroid should miss Earth?" he queried.

"By about 12 million miles," Steve replied.

"How much room for error do we have?" the Professor asked.

"Not much," replied Steve. "I'd say less than one per cent. At the current distance of the asteroid, there's plenty of room for error, but its course only has to be out by a couple of degrees to have our name on it. I can do a quick calculation on screen."

He then made a projection for the asteroid to hit Earth, to equate a true estimate.

"In actual fact, Frank, according to my calculations, we have less than one per cent room for error," said Steve.

This gave them all much concern.

"Print me the asteroid's current course and a projected course to hit Earth," the Professor instructed. "I'll send a copy to the President."

"Shall I leave out its earlier course, before it was deflected near the Kuiper belt?" Steve queried.

"Yes," replied Professor Marshall. "We don't want to confuse the President, do we! I'll send another copy to Mr Luddolmans, too. They're flying to Moscow next Wednesday and this is on the agenda."

"When was that arranged?" asked Robert. "I didn't think there were any summits just now."

"This is top secret, so don't say anything about it," ordered the Professor.

"How come you knew about it?" asked Steve.

“Because I've been invited along,” said Professor Marshall.

It Happened Tomorrow

It was Tuesday September 25th 2008. Professor Marshall was due to fly to Washington that afternoon. While he was preparing documents and data in his office, to take with him to Moscow, the phone rang.

“Hello Frank,” said an old friend of his from the European Space Agency.

“Dermot O'Hagan here, I just wanted to pick your brains for few moments.”

“Hi Dermot, I'd love to talk to you but I have a very important meeting to go to,” Professor Marshall replied.

“Oh don't worry, this won't take long,” said Dermot.

“How can I help?” asked the Professor.

“It's probably more how I can help you,” Dermot replied.

“Well now, I can't refuse that, can I,” laughed Professor Marshall.

“I've noticed a rather strange object in the solar system just at the moment,” Dermot told him. “It's currently approaching the orbit of Neptune, and I thought you may want to know about it.”

Professor Marshall went quiet for a moment.

“Hello Frank, are you still there?” asked Dermot on the other end of the line, as though the call had been cut off.

“Oh, erhh, I'm still here Dermot,” said the Professor. “I think I'd better put you through to one of my staff. He said he's seen something strange in the solar system, too.”

Professor Marshall then transferred the call to Steve.

“Good morning, NASA HQ,” Steve said at the other end of the line.

“Steve, it's me, Frank Marshall,” said the Professor. “I've got Dermot O'Hagan from the European Space Agency on the line. It sounds as if he's spotted that asteroid, so can you take this call.”

“What shall I tell him, Frank?” asked Steve.

“As little as possible. Try and find out how much he knows, and whether the ESA have anything planned,” ordered the Professor, before putting his phone down.

After brief greetings, Dermot introduced himself to Steve and described the strange object in the solar system.

“What do you think it might be?” Steve asked Dermot.

“I'm not really sure,” replied Dermot. “I was hoping you may be able to

help me in that respect.”

“I’m not really sure either,” said Steve. “It’s probably too large to be a comet.”

“And it’s traveling too fast to be an asteroid,” added Dermot. “Are you sure it’s not a large comet?”

“I can’t really say for certain,” replied Steve. “Have you projected its course, at its current speed and distance?”

“From what I can make out, it will come within 20 million kilometres of Earth,” Dermot told him. “Do NASA have any plans when this thing heads our way?”

“We may have to develop some sort of contingency plan, but that will be dependent on how close this thing comes,” Steve replied. “Do you have any plans or projects?”

“Well, I’d be grateful if you could keep this close to your chest for now, particularly as only a few other senior ESA staff are aware of this,” said Dermot. “We considered sending a rocket to examine it, but this would mean we may have to inform our national leaders.”

“I don’t think that would be a wise move,” Steve suggested.

“Why ever not, may I ask?” queried Dermot.

“Well, with due respect to many leaders, it seems very easy to leak information to the press and media in some parts of Europe,” expressed Steve.

“I know the United Kingdom is very bad for leaked information, but not all countries are like the UK,” replied Dermot.

“It isn’t just the UK, though, is it,” insisted Steve. “Look at Germany – the Pope made a brief statement last year in a Christian church from a reading which has Mohamed and evil in the same sentence. Twenty-four hours later, the whole of the Islamic world are aware of it and burning figures of the Pope.”

“What has this got to do with Islamic extremists?” asked Dermot.

“Nothing, it just underlines the fact that information is leaked too easily in parts of Europe,” emphasised Steve.

“I take your point,” Dermot agreed sadly. “How about the President? Is he aware of this mysterious object?”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say,” replied Steve.

“If the President is aware, which is what I presume from your statement, then surely European heads of state must also be made aware,” insisted Dermot.

“I can’t instruct you not to inform your heads of state, but if this gets out,

it's only going to cause panic and scaremongering," suggested Steve.

"I know, I know," Dermot sighed reluctantly. "Surely though, if we make it clear that this thing is not likely to come closer than 20 million kilometers from Earth, people shouldn't start to panic?"

"Oh I wouldn't be too sure," replied Steve. "Besides, there are people who may want to cause panic and scaremongering."

"Who, like terrorists?" asked Dermot. "There are enough of them around already causing panic."

"Which is why we don't want anymore reasons to panic about," insisted Steve.

"We'll have to tell our leaders about this sometime," Dermot told Steve.

"And I don't want to be around when they find out they were being kept in the dark."

"As I said earlier, I can't instruct you not to inform your heads of state, but please don't do anything too rash just yet," said Steve. "Perhaps you can inform your heads of state when we're a little more certain of this things' course."

Dermot acknowledged, rather reluctantly.

"I've got some reports to look at so I'll have to go now, but keep me posted on developments at your end," requested Steve.

"Okay," agreed Dermot. "But please let me know what's going on at NASA. After all, we don't want Gordon Bear finding out about this from the President. Good day to you."

It was just gone 2.00 pm in the afternoon when Professor Marshall came to Steve's office.

"Hi Steve, can't stay long, I've got a flight to catch in a few hours," said the Professor. "Have you got today's reports and documented the satellite images for the asteroid yet?"

Steve printed copies and gave them to the Professor.

"You may notice that today's image for the asteroid shows it very slightly out of sync,"

Steve informed the Professor.

"I can't look into it now, but is it closer than projected or further away?" asked Professor Marshall.

"Slightly behind where we would have anticipated," said Steve. "I would have notified you earlier, but I knew you were busy. As it was only by a fraction out, I thought I'd leave it for now, see what tomorrow's images tell us."

"Perhaps the time it was taken was slightly out of sync," suggested the Professor.

"I've checked that," Steve informed him. "Both today's and yesterdays images were taken at the same time to the minute, 24 hours excepted of course."

"Perhaps the timer on the International Space Station is slightly out," suggested the Professor.

"Not according to the crew," said Steve. "They said there was no problem with the timing. The thing is, if the timing was out, all of the other images would be out of sync, too."

Professor Marshall pondered to himself for a moment.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Frank?" asked Steve. "It could mean the asteroid coming closer to Earth than we currently estimate."

"I don't have time to look into it now, Steve, but keep me informed," he ordered. "At least it may give us a bit more lee-way with the President for now."

Precisely how much lee-way, Professor Marshall didn't appreciate at the time, before changing the subject.

"How did you get on with Dermot O'Hagan?"

"Well, only a few people at the ESA are aware of the asteroid, at the moment," he told Frank. "They do intend notifying the European heads of state at some time, though."

"I hope you told Dermot all the trouble it will cause if the ESA do tell their leaders about this," Professor Marshall queried.

"Oh I told him alright," said Steve. "He seemed to realise that as soon as you inform European heads of state, it's as good as going public on the matter. He accepted how much information is leaked and that once you inform one leader, they all have to be informed."

"Do they have anything in mind to deflect the asteroid?" asked the Professor.

"They're not considering deflecting the asteroid at the moment," Steve explained. "The ESA are more interested in sending a probe to it."

"What!!!" exclaimed Professor Marshall. "Do they know how close that thing's going to come to Earth?"

"Apparently so," said Steve. "Dermot's projections are similar to mine."

"Well they must be having a laugh, because the European heads of state will still be debating how much to fund such a project when the asteroid goes past Earth," Professor Marshall commented.

"Was there anything else I should know about before I leave?" asked

Professor Marshall.

"Nothing serious that you don't already know about," replied Steve.

"Good," said Professor Marshall. "I'll speak to you tomorrow morning then, before the flight to Moscow. You can tell me then that you'd just heard from the ESA about the asteroid."

"What, like it happened tomorrow?" queried Steve.

"That's the idea," said the Professor. "I don't think rumours about this asteroid are going to get around in 24 hours. Oh, and by the way, can you put that spreadsheet with the asteroid projections onto your laptop - I may need to contact you at short notice."

"Like at 3.00 am in the morning?" queried Steve.

"Well, the time is 9 hours ahead of us, in Moscow," Professor Marshall pointed out. "I'll see that you get paid on-call. I may call you tonight, but otherwise I'll speak to you tomorrow."

"Best of luck," Steve wished the Professor.

"Thanks Steve," said Professor Marshall, "I may need it."

The Professor now had two hectic days ahead of him. First of all, he caught the 16.30 flight to Washington DC. Though this was only a two-hour journey, Washington was an hour ahead, and after getting through customs at a time of high alert and catching a bite to eat, it wasn't until 21.00 that he booked into the airport motel.

Professor Marshall couldn't afford to stay up too late, either, as he had an important flight to catch the next morning. After he had breakfast at 7.30 he booked out, and by 8 o'clock he was at the airport again, waiting to meet the President and Secretary for Defence, Fred Luddolmans, in the Departure lounge.

"Professor Marshall!" he heard a shout from nearby. It was Fred. "Come this way."

As Professor Marshall walked towards Fred, he noticed four bodyguards with him.

"Hi. How are Clint and Corny getting along?" Fred asked the Professor, as he led him to a door marked 'private'.

"Air Commander Williams and Major General Smith?" queried the Professor. "They've been meeting NASA Engineers and are in the process of designing a new missile to use in space."

"Good," remarked Fred, as he led the Professor past the private door and into a passageway.

Three of the bodyguards then followed Fred and the Professor past the

door, while the remaining bodyguard stayed behind and locked the door.

"What's the latest with the asteroid?" Fred then asked.

"Well, we may not be in imminent danger just yet," Professor Marshall told him.

"How close will the thing come to Earth?" asked Fred,

"Some images suggest the asteroid may not come to within 12 million miles of Earth," replied the Professor. "Images from the International Space Station have been somewhat erratic, though, so we're constantly reviewing the situation."

"That's a fair distance," commented Fred.

"It sounds a fair distance, but believe me, it's not much in astronomical terms," the Professor informed Fred. "If our projections are out by less than one per cent, the asteroid could smash into Earth."

"Hhmmmm," muttered Fred as they came to another door. "It sounds like we need to keep a close eye on this one."

"To make matters worse, sir, yesterdays images were slightly out of sync with our projections, too," added Professor Marshall, which gave him a reminder. "Can I make a call to NASA?" he requested.

"You'd better make it quick, as the President's plane is waiting outside," Fred told him.

Professor Marshall then contacted Steve, who, unbeknown to Fred, was at home getting ready to go to work.

"Hi Steve, Frank here, what's the latest on the asteroid?" the Professor asked.

"I've just had a call from another guy at the European Space Agency," said Steve. "It seems like the Europeans are aware of the asteroid."

"Have you received today's images and reports from the 'Space Station yet?" asked the Professor.

"No, not yet," replied Steve. "I'll let you know when I hear something."

Professor Marshall then turned to Fred and asked if he could leave his mobile on during the flight.

"I don't think so," Fred told the Professor. "You can check that with the President though."

"I probably won't be able to contact you until late this afternoon," he then told Steve on his mobile. "I'll have to go now, so have a nice day."

Fred then opened the door in front of them, from where a strong gust of wind blew into the passageway. Outside was a cordoned-off runway with the President's plane. As Fred led the Professor towards the steps, two of the bodyguards followed them, whilst the third stayed behind and

locked the door. They then boarded the jet, where the President was waiting on board.

"Hi, guys," he said to them, then looking towards the Professor. "You must be Professor Marshall."

The Professor simply smiled and greeted the President. After they had sat down, there was then an announcement from the cockpit that all doors would be closing, and instructing passengers to be seated and to fasten their safety belts.

"We've got eight hours to get to know each other," the President then said.

"My name's George – what's yours?"

"Oh you can call me Frank," replied Professor Marshall. "Are we flying directly to Moscow?"

"I thought it might be better like this just at the moment," replied the President. "People may get suspicious if it make our journey too obvious."

"Don't you wish to discuss the asteroid, Mr President?" Frank queried.

"You can discuss that with Fred, if there are any points you wish to raise," the President told him. "First we can relax for a while. I've brought along some DVDs you may want to see during the flight."

"Do you have any light entertainment, like 'Meet The Fockers', or 'Tootsie'?" Fred asked the President.

"No I haven't I'm afraid," replied the President. "I did bring all the Star Wars movies, though. I thought Frank might like to see something like that."

Professor Marshall simply smiled at the President, and kept his thoughts to himself.

"I like the Star Wars movies," the President added. "Specially when the good guys beat the bad guys, don't you?"

"I think I'd better warn you, Mr President, the European Space Agency are aware of the asteroid," Professor Marshall then pointed out.

"When did you hear that?" asked the President. "Do you reckon they'd tell their heads of state?"

"I don't know," said the Professor. "One of my staff at NASA told me he received a call from the ESA this morning."

Fred Luddolmans looked at the President and nodded his head, to confirm what the Professor had said.

"Well let's just hope this doesn't get out too soon, then, or all hell may break loose," the President commented.

After the plane had taken off, Professor Marshall explained to the

President that the asteroid was not perceived to come as close as first anticipated. He emphasised that it was behaving erratically, however, and that it needed to be carefully monitored. He also added that the latest movements were out of sync with recent projections, and that there was little room for error. It would be very interesting to see what data the Russians had.

Professor Marshall then asked the President if he could contact NASA during the flight, as he wanted to know about the latest report and images of the asteroid.

“Couldn't you have got this information while this plane was on the ground?” the President asked Professor Marshall.

“I'm afraid not, Mr President,” replied the Professor. “This data is received at 10.00 am each morning, Houston time, or 11.00 a.m. in Washington. “

“Couldn't you have asked for it to be submitted earlier?” quizzed the President.

“I'm afraid not, sir,” replied Professor Marshall. “This information has to come in at the exact time each day so we can quantify the asteroid's movements. Yesterday's movements were out of sync, so I'm very curious about today's. If they're out of sync again, it could mean the asteroid may come a lot closer to Earth than we have so far envisaged.”

The President considered Professor Marshall's request.

“I'd like to agree to this, but we have to adhere to strict regulations not to use mobiles whilst in flight,” the President informed him, before turning to Fred. “Can you do me a favour and put this Star Wars DVD on, thanks.”

Professor Marshall then sat through the long flight having to endure two Star Wars movies, plus Armageddon. Needless to say, he was half asleep as the plane touched down on a military airbase just outside Moscow, shortly before 1 o'clock the next morning, Moscow time.

After a swift acknowledgment and a check of credentials by the Commander at the base, the President and his team were escorted to a top hotel in the centre of Moscow. Along the way, Professor Marshall took out his mobile and called Steve.

“Hi Steve, it's me, Frank,” he said as Steve picked up his phone. “You still at work?”

“It's only just gone 4.15 in the afternoon here,” Steve replied. “I'm still sorting some data, but I'll be leaving in about an hour.”

“Have you received today's report from the 'Space Station?’” asked the Professor.

“We have, and it's out of sync again,” Steve informed him.

"Out of sync to yesterday's movements or Monday's?" he asked.

"The asteroid's movements are very similar to yesterday's," said Steve. "I've re-estimated it's trajectory, and it looks like coming within five million miles of Earth."

Professor Marshall informed Fred Luddolmans, who sat alongside him, of the revised estimate.

"Could you let me know what estimates the Russians have for the asteroid," asked Steve, on the other end of the mobile phone. "We're going to have to monitor this very closely."

He then heard a yawn from Professor Marshall.

"You sound tired, Frank," Steve commented.

"Call it jet lag," replied the Professor looking at his watch. "It's 1.15 in the morning here, and I've been up since 6.30 yesterday. I'll speak to you tomorrow."

Professor Marshall tried to put his head down, but Fred was being rather inquisitive.

"Do you seriously believe this asteroid will smash into Earth?" asked Fred.

"No, not if our projections are correct," replied the Professor. "However, this is no normal asteroid. It's too big, too erratic, and heading in our direction. It must be constantly monitored, because if our estimates are ever so slightly incorrect, or if by some chance the asteroid changes course ever-so-slightly, it may have disastrous results."

"I'm rather mystified about it's movements," said Fred. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but from what I can make out, it's 'slowed down'."

Professor Marshall just nodded his head.

"I didn't think asteroids could slow down," Fred commented. "Are you sure someone hasn't got their sums wrong?"

"Yes I am sure," replied the Professor. "My staff have checked and double-checked the images and reports, and I've examined them too. We've all come to the same conclusions, however strange they may seem."

"Do you think someone in the International Space Station took the wrong images?" asked Fred.

"I'm absolutely sure they haven't done," replied the Professor. "These were double-checked on the ISS before the reports were made and sent to NASA. Even the European Space Agency have cottoned on to the asteroid, and their figures agreed with our previous estimates."

"Before the asteroid 'slowed down'?" queried Fred.

"Yes – before the asteroid 'slowed down'," replied the Professor. "The

European Space Agency aren't even sure if it's an asteroid."

"Do you think it may not be an asteroid?" asked Fred. "Could it be a meteorite or a comet?"

"I don't know," replied the Professor. "I can't be absolutely 100% sure."

"Do you think it could be a space ship?" asked Fred. "Like Battlestar Galactica, you remember that don't you? Or like Darth Vader's ship we saw in Star Wars tonight?"

"We don't know," the Professor replied abruptly. "According to NASA's best estimates for the thing's size and dimensions however, we believe it to be an asteroid. Now can we wait and see what the Russians have to say about this tomorrow."

"You mean later today," pointed out Fred.

"Sorry, later today," replied the Professor. "What time is the meeting, by the way?"

"One o'clock," said Fred. "I think you'd better get some sleep when we get to the hotel. I'll come and wake you in the morning."

It wasn't much longer before they arrived at their hotel. After Professor Marshall went to his room, he put his head down and went to sleep. He slept well that morning. Later, at almost 10.00 o'clock, Fred knocked at Professor Marshall's door.

"Come in, come in," he said, before apologising to Fred for his rant in the car in the early hours of the morning, as Fred entered the room.

"That's okay, no offence taken," said Fred. "I see you've been up a little while already. Are you going anywhere?"

"I was just getting ready to have breakfast," said the Professor.

"I'm saving myself for lunch," replied Fred. "Did you know that the Russian president is taking us all for a meal before the meeting? I'm told we're being taken to the best restaurant in the city."

"I was aware of that, but I didn't want to rely on a large lunch," said the Professor. "I'm not used to Russian cuisine, anyway."

"Oh I wouldn't worry about that," said Fred. "This is the first time I've been to Moscow, but if the restaurant is anything like the ones I've been to in Budapest, Prague or Kiev, then I'm sure there'll be a wide variety on the menu. Besides, you've probably missed breakfast anyway."

Professor Marshall looked at the clock and thought about what Fred had said. He said he was feeling hungry and that he'd rather go to find something to eat.

"Do you speak Russian?" Fred asked the Professor.

"No," he replied.

"Well I doubt you'd get very far out there," Fred chuckled. "You may as well order something from the hotel. I'm sure they'll make any snack you request."

"Do you think they'd bring me up a fried breakfast?" asked the Professor.

"Probably - I had a bowl of cornflakes and some coffee this morning," said Fred. "Besides, we may as well stay here and watch TV."

"Do they have US TV stations here?" asked the Professor.

"They have satellite TV here," Fred told him.

"When did you find that out?" asked the Professor.

"The US Ambassador told me so this morning," said Fred. "I'm sure you'll find Fox, Bloomberg or ABC News at least."

Fred then picked up the remote control and switched on the TV, before searching the channels. He stopped when he found a NBC station. In the meantime, Professor Marshall went to his phone and ordered his fried breakfast.

"Would you like me to order anything on your behalf?" the Professor asked Fred.

"Ask them to bring up a pot of coffee and a couple of mugs," Fred suggested. "We can share that."

While they were waiting for the breakfast order to arrive, Fred and the Professor noticed an item where the European Space Agency claimed to have discovered a large object in the solar system, heading towards Earth. Fred and the Professor looked at each other, but before they could say much the doorbell rang. It was Professor Marshall's breakfast being delivered. By the time this was brought into the room and put on his table, the item about the asteroid had ended. They watched the news eagerly for the next hour, but that particular news item wasn't highlighted again. While they were watching the news the Thriller ringtone came on.

"Hello, Mr Luddolmans here, how can I help," said Fred.

"Hi Fred, George here," said the President, who was on the other end of the line. "Where are you? Are you ready for lunch yet?"

"I'm with Professor Marshall at the moment," Fred replied. "When are Mr Boritzov's escorts coming to pick us up?"

"The escorts are due here at 11.30," the President told Fred. "Lunch is at 12.00."

"Have you seen the news this morning?" Fred asked the President.

"No, I've just been relaxing," said the President. "Will you two be long?"

"We'll be down shortly," replied Fred, as he noticed the clock was indicating 11.15. "We'll meet you in reception."

Fred and Professor Marshall met the President and his bodyguards in reception about five minutes later. They didn't have long to wait before two chauffeured Mercedes came along to pick them up. They were then taken to a top restaurant, in Red Square. As they got out of the Mercedes', a waiter then led them to a secluded area inside, where they met Mr Boritzov and Professor Kamilichenko of the Russian Space Federation.

During the meal, Mr Boritzov was briefly watching the lunchtime news on the TV in the room. He noticed an item where the European Space Agency claimed to have discovered an 'object' heading towards Earth. He mentioned this, in Russian, to Professor Kamilichenko, but didn't show his annoyance at the table.

This was raised at the meeting afterwards, where Fred and the Professor said they had noticed this earlier, too. The President was a little angry at first, but anger soon turned to worry when Fred asked what they should do about all the hype and prophecy that would inevitably be heard all around the world now that the 'cat had been let out the bag'. He was also concerned how the terrorists would react. Mr Boritzov was also concerned, as there were similar problems on his own doorstep, so to speak.

Professor Kamilichenko then announced that he believed this was no asteroid heading towards Earth, but a comet. Professor Marshall wasn't so sure and asked Professor Kamilichenko how he came to this conclusion. Professor Kamilichenko said that it had been discovered around the Kuiper belt, or was possibly from the Oort Cloud at the edge of the solar system where comets were known to orbit. He was uncertain why it was traveling at such a high speed, but said that without better evidence, he believed it to be a comet. Moreover, he introduced a model of a spaceship designed to destroy any comet heading towards Earth. This had a strong, radio-active laser beam, which, when fired at the comet, would vaporise its frozen elements, and would deflect what remained of it.

Professor Marshall was impressed with the model, though he wasn't convinced that this was a comet, and asked Professor Kamilichenko if this could have any effect on an asteroid. Professor Kamilichenko believed that this would be effective, but hoped it would not be necessary.

Professor Marshall didn't wish to argue the case further for the time being. Instead, he asked about the Russian's reports and images of the 'comet'. It turned out that the the Russian's had been receiving data from the International Space Station exactly the same as that sent to NASA. Both Professor's wanted to continue monitoring the object, and so agreed to exchange records. As Moscow was ahead of Houston, timewise, Professor Kamilichenko's team would send his records to NASA at about 08.00 each morning (11.00 pm at Houston). Dr Steve de Pierri would then analyse the data at 09.00 the next morning, before NASA's data was received at 10.00. After this was analysed, records would be sent to Moscow, to be picked up by a member of Professor Kamilichenko's team who was on a night shift.

As they discussed this, Professor Kamilichenko stated that the latest data was in line with that of recent days. It was also acknowledged that both sets of statistics agreed that the object, asteroid or comet, would come to within five million miles of Earth, sometime in February 2008.

Though there had been a few disagreements in Moscow, the meeting went well. That however, was the easy part. The difficult task now was to keep as much information as possible away from the general public at home. A bigger problem still, was how would the rest of the world react, and how the US (along with Russia and Europe) should handle the situation.

Moments of Doubt

Both NASA and the Russian Space Federation found it very helpful exchanging images of the 'asteroid'. With two images a day, it would be easier to spot any change of movement.

As it was, there appeared to be no change of movement over the next three months. As the object' came closer and closer to Earth, one thing the images seemed to prove was that it was not a comet, as the Russians had suggested, but more likely, an asteroid. It's speed remained very fast indeed.

All parties tried to play-down the asteroid, emphasising that it would not crash into Earth, but this didn't stop the doom-merchants. Islamic fundamentalists proclaimed that the asteroid was to collide with Earth, and that this was as a punishment to the US and UK. Many Christians

referred back to Nostradamus, claiming he had prophesised Napoleon, Hitler and 9/11, and that doomsday lay just around the corner.

These suggestions, however, were relatively few. This was helped by the fact that NASA, the Russians', the ESA, and additionally the Chinese and Japanese space agencies all agreed that the asteroid would, at it's closest, be around five million miles away from Earth. Or so they thought.

Back on the Interstellar Pilgrim, they were now swiftly approaching the orbit of ZR4. By now, many more of those in hibernation were awoken. The Interstellar Pilgrim herself was very busy. Commander Ondichi called a meeting of the full council to discuss the plans ahead for their intended target, ZR3, otherwise known as Earth. Major Retono chaired the meeting.

"Thank you everyone for attending this meeting," he greeted all those present. "If you are not already aware, we are quickly approaching our intended destination. I would like, with the help of the rest of the full council, to put in place plans for the forthcoming mission. Consequently I have invited other important crew members along to help construct the forthcoming plans. Before we discuss ZR3, however, I wish to refer the next item on the agenda to Professor Wagstaff."

"Thank you Major," said Professor Wagstaff before turning to rest of the council. "As some of you may know, I have been monitoring ZR4 and have found very little difference to the planet since when we last came this way."

"Are there are any signs of life?" asked councilor Julius.

"There appear to be no signs of life at all," replied Professor Wagstaff.

"There is very little atmosphere in which to retain the heat required to develop life."

"What about water?" asked councilor Cartney. "Have we not diverted comets towards ZR4, to despatch water?"

Major Retono, who hadn't been keen on the original idea in the first place, then quickly stepped in.

"For those new members of the council, and those with a non-scientific interest, could you please explain, Professor Wagstaff, the process of diverting comets to hit ZR4," he asked.

"Certainly," the professor replied before turning to the rest of the council.

"Comets comprise a number of elements and substances, including ice, frozen methane and nitrogen. It is intended that the impact of the comet crashing into ZR4 will heat these components."

"Can you please explain the process?" asked Commander Ondichi.

"These components will all evaporate to give ZR4 an atmosphere," Professor Wagstaff explained. "The water vapor will form clouds, which will later fall as rain. Nitrogen will remain in the upper atmosphere, as will methane, which will act as a greenhouse gas to maintain heat on ZR4."

"Surely, one comet will not be enough to give ZR4 a new atmosphere," commented councilor Cartney.

"It appears that ZR4 has two polar caps which should contain water," said Professor Wagstaff. "These will be heated by the initial impact and will evaporate along with the water from the comet. We have also diverted a second comet, which will hit ZR4 at a later date."

"How large are these comets?" asked councilor Julius.

"These are both fairly large comets, the first one in particular," replied Professor Wagstaff.

"How long will it take to develop life?" asked councilor Utan.

"Water alone cannot develop life," replied Professor Wagstaff. "Professor Schmidt and I have discussed ways in which ZR4 can be heated and for an atmosphere to be created."

"I believe other suggestions are also being considered in the effort to develop ZR4?" Major Retono said to Professor Wagstaff. "Could you please elaborate on them?"

"ZR6 has a satellite which contains an atmosphere, including liquid methane," Professor Wagstaff explained to the council. "This may be transported to ZR4 to further enhance a greenhouse effect to heat the planet."

"Are you satisfied that this will create life on ZR4?" queried Major Retono.

"Similar experiments have been successful in developing planetary life-forms on previous missions elsewhere in the cosmos," Professor Wagstaff informed the council. "Professor Schmidt and I are confident this will be successful again. However, we must first see what happens following the comet impacts."

Major Retono then turned towards Professor Schmidt.

"What have you made of ZR3?" asked Major Retono. "Our records suggest an atmosphere made two-thirds of Nitrogen and one-third Oxygen. Does this seem to be the current quantity of ZR3's atmosphere?"

"Not quite," said Professor Schmidt. "This is made largely of Nitrogen in the upper atmosphere, plus small quantities of Carbon-Dioxide and Methane. ZR3 should be safe to visit however, as there is plenty of Oxygen, water, and hence life, in the lower atmosphere."

"Have you detected any life on ZR3?" asked Major Retono.

"There appears to be a multitude of life-forms on the planet," Professor Schmidt informed the council. "Indeed, there appear to be creatures suited to many different habitats and locations, including some similar to ourselves."

"How large are these life-forms?" asked the commander. "Do any of them seem dangerous, as were those creatures our ancestors left behind many, eons ago?"

"There are some large creatures, but none as large as those who our forefathers left behind on ZR3," replied Professor Schmidt. "There even appear to be creatures like us."

"When you say creatures like us, do you mean human or ape?" asked Major Kong.

"Probably both, though I cannot say with great certainty as yet," replied Professor Schmidt. "Those which I refer to seem to have developed a commanding life of ZR3. There also appear to be structures orbiting ZR3 which are not satellites in any form we know of. I suspect they may be created by some of the creatures on ZR3."

"You believe there is intelligent life on ZR3?" queried Major Kong.

"Probably," replied Professor Schmidt. "I cannot say how intelligent with any great certainty as yet, however."

"Intelligent enough to develop their own satellites?" queried Councillor Cartney.

"This would appear to be so," replied Professor Schmidt.

"What are their habitats like?" asked Councillor Utan.

"Most creatures appear to live on land," said Professor Schmidt.

"However, some creatures appear to be able to fly. There is also a great deal of water on ZR3, which is probably occupied by other creatures. I will inform the council of more information the closer we progress towards ZR3."

"What is the temperature range on ZR3?" asked councilor Julius.

"Temperatures will vary depending upon location and timescales," replied Professor Schmidt. "However, these appear to be at the upper end of our temperature range."

"Have you detected any natural activities on ZR3?" asked Major Retono.

"There appear to be occasional violent winds," replied Professor Schmidt.

"There also appear to be regular explosions in some places. Whether this is due to weather, volcanic activity or otherwise I cannot say with great certainty at the moment."

“Professor, I would like to arrange to examine your records of ZR3 at some time,” requested Major Retono. “I would also like to see your observations, particularly as we approach ZR3.”

“You don't doubt my words?” queried Professor Schmidt.

“No, no,” replied Major Retono. “However, if I, or any other members of the Interstellar Pilgrim, are to visit ZR3, we would like a closer inspection of the data ourselves.”

Major Kong seconded Major Retono's suggestion. Other council members agreed, and the proposal was carried.

“I propose that in the meantime we reduce speed, so as we may have more time to study ZR3,” suggested Major Kong. “I believe we require more time to assess the situation ahead of us.”

“We are currently reducing speed,” Major Retono pointed out. “I do, however, agree that we should continue to reduce speed further for the reasons suggested by Major Kong, and I therefore second the proposal.”

“If we are to visit ZR3, do we have any plan as to where we should arrive?” asked Commander Ondichi.

“We would have a wide range of locations in which to land,” explained Professor Schmidt. “One third of the planet is solid, and there appear to be two ice-capped regions.”

“I have read about ZR3 previously, and have some ideas for suitable locations,” said Major Retono. “However, I suggest we wait and see what we discover further about ZR3 before making any plans.”

“Agreed,” said Commander Ondichi as the proposal was carried.

Back at NASA HQ, February was now approaching. Steve was examining the latest images of the asteroid. He entered the data onto the spreadsheet and ran the macro to calculate it's trajectory, expecting to see it unchanged. However, Steve was surprised to see it's movements were out of sync again. He studied the images and re-entered the data, before re-calculating the trajectory. To his astonishment, the result was the same. He called Professor Marshall immediately.

“Frank, Frank, this asteroid, it appears to be slowing down,” he told the Professor.

“What!” said an astonished Professor Marshall. “Are you sure?”

“Going on our latest images the asteroid may come a bit closer to Earth than we think,” said Steve.

“Have you contacted the International Space Station?” asked Professor Marshall.

"Not yet," replied Steve. "I thought I'd inform you first."

"I'll be with you in a minute," the Professor told him. "In the meantime, call the crew of the ISS. Get those images clarified first. We need to be sure about this."

Steve called Robert Langman, to see if the images of the comets had altered in any way, before contacting the ISS, and requesting the latest images of the 'asteroid' be double-checked and re-sent back to NASA. Soon after putting his phone down, it rang again.

"Hi Steve, Rob' here, I've checked the images of each of the comets due to collide with Mars, and they're courses appear to be unchanged," Robert said to him. "Each image seems in order, like they're in the same region, none of the surrounding stars have moved to any greater significance than would otherwise be expected."

"Can you come to my office, please, Rob," asked Steve. "We're going to have to review my data again. It appears that the asteroid's movements have altered."

Robert came along quickly, and examined the images. Once again, he entered the data and ran the macro. Once again, the asteroid seemed to be slowing. As Steve and Robert were discussing what may have happened, Professor Marshall entered the office.

"Have you spoken to the ISS crew yet, Steve," he asked.

"Yes Frank, I'm waiting for them to get back to me," replied Steve. "I've double-checked my calculations, and Rob has just checked them again. We keep coming up with the same results."

"And what precisely are the results?" asked the Professor.

"Well, if these images are correct and taken precisely 24 hours after our last images, the asteroid will come to within three-and-a-half million miles of Earth," replied Steve.

"Could anything have caused the asteroid to lose speed?" asked the Professor.

"It appears to be near to the orbit of Mars," said Robert. "Perhaps it smashed into something in the asteroid belt."

"Shouldn't we have noticed that yesterday, if that was the case?" asked Professor Marshall.

"Perhaps it collided into something at the inner end of the asteroid belt," suggested Steve. "The speed that asteroid has been traveling at, I think it's plausible that it may have occurred over the last 24 hours."

"Let's wait and see if the images are in sequence, first," said the Professor.

Steve's phone then rang. It was a message from the International Space Station indicating that the latest asteroid images were indeed in sequence, taken precisely 24 hours after their last images.

"Have you received yesterday's report from the Russians' yet?" asked the Professor. "They will have received similar images from the ISS 12 hours ago. Check if they're images were out of sync at all."

Steve pulled the Russian report out from his drawer. He read the report carefully, which seemed to suggest no sudden change of movement or speed. He then looked carefully at the images along with Robert and Professor Marshall, before entering the data into his PC. When the calculations were completed there appeared to be no change to yesterday's movements. It seemed clear that any change of movement, for whatever reason, occurred in the last 12 hours.

"Steve, can you contact the Russians'," Professor Marshall suggested.

"I can call Moscow, but wouldn't it be better coming from you?" asked Steve.

"I'm going to have to inform the President of this," replied the Professor.

"First I've got to think carefully what to tell him. There's something very odd about this asteroid. If it is an asteroid?"

"It doesn't appear to act like anything else from space, either," added Robert. "When this thing first appeared, it was traveling at over a million miles per hour. Even though it's movements have since slowed, it's still probably the fastest object we've ever witnessed."

"What speed is it traveling at now, Steve?" Frank asked.

Steve checked the movements over the last twelve hours to calculate the asteroid's speed.

"It's still traveling at over 850,000 miles per hour," said Dr de Pieri. "That's over four times faster than a comet. It should still miss Earth, but if it slows down any more, well...I wouldn't want to think about the possibilities."

Professor Marshall tried to contact the President, to notify him of the asteroid's latest movements, but this was in vain. He managed to contact Fred Luddolmans, however, and after bringing this to his attention, asked him to pass on the message. The President, however, had a surprise call just after midnight that evening. He was awoken from his sleep by an alarming call from his Russian counterpart.

"Hello, hello, George, Mr Boritzov speaking," said the Russian President.

"Have you heard about the asteroid?"

"Yes, I was informed this morning," replied the President. "I understand it

will come closer to Earth than we first thought. Something like 3.3 million miles from Earth."

"3.3 million miles?" queried Mr Boritzov. "I heard it will come even closer, one-and-three-quarter million miles from Earth."

"What!!" shrieked the President. "When did you hear that?"

"Few minutes ago," replied Mr Boritzov.

"Are you sure?" asked the President.

"Yes, yes, yes, my Space Federation told me so," Mr Boritzov told the President. "I may order to prepare my space laser jets."

"Wait, wait a minute," said the President. "How close did you say this asteroid will be? 1.75 million miles? That's still some way away. Let's not get too hasty just yet."

"You think we should wait?" queried Mr Boritzov.

"Let me get in touch with NASA. I'll see what they say, and get back to you later," said the President, before putting the phone down and getting back into bed.

"Did I hear the phone ring?" asked the First Lady as she walked into the bedroom.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," replied the President. "It was just the Russian President, worried about this asteroid. He says it may come closer to Earth than we anticipated – one-and-tree-quarter million miles."

"Is that supposed to be close?" commented the First Lady.

"Nah, nah," replied the President. "I'll just tell Fred Luddolmans – he can deal with the matter."

Fifteen minutes later, Professor Marshall received a call from Fred.

"Didn't you tell me today that the asteroid was going to come about 3.3 million miles from Earth?" Fred asked the Professor.

"Yes," replied Professor Marshall. "I think we need to monitor the asteroid in case it gets any closer."

"Well, as I understand it, the Russians' believe this asteroid will come about 1.75 million miles from Earth," Fred told the Professor. "Are you sure our figures are correct?"

"I'm sure they are," replied the Professor. "However, it sounds like the latest movements indicate a further reduction in the asteroid's speed."

"Do we have any missiles or space shuttles to deal with this problem?" asked Fred.

"We have a missile designed and prepared to handle the asteroid if it comes closer to Earth," Professor Marshall informed him. "Air

Commander Clint Williams is currently in training to fly the space shuttle."

"Do you think we may have to use the shuttle?" asked Fred.

"I don't know," replied Professor Marshall. "I've said before, this is no ordinary asteroid. From Earth, it looks like an asteroid, but it sure doesn't behave like one. I'll contact my staff, and ask one of them to go to NASA HQ to check the records Moscow have sent us. They can double-check the images and projection."

"And what if the Russians' records are correct?" quizzed Fred.

"I don't know," replied Professor Marshall. "I really don't know. What frightens me more is what the next report and images will indicate."

"When will NASA receive them?" asked Fred.

"10.00 am, or thereabouts," said the Professor. "There's not much point worrying ourselves silly over this just yet. You may as well get some sleep, while I contact Steve and ask him to verify the records. I'll let you know the results tomorrow."

As Professor Marshall was about to hang up something crossed his mind.

"Fred, you don't mind if I call you Fred, do you?" asked the Professor, to which Mr Luddolmans acknowledged. "Do you recall that night in Moscow when you asked if I thought whether this asteroid could be a space ship?"

"Vaguely," said Fred.

"Was you serious?" Frank asked him. "Do you really think there could be some other race of life in search of Earth?"

"I don't know," sighed Fred. "Call me tomorrow morning and let me know the results."

Professor Marshall then phoned Steve, where it was now almost midnight, Houston-time. He asked him to go back to NASA HQ, to check the data sent by Moscow.

"What, right now?" queried Steve queried.

"Yes now, preferably," replied Professor Marshall. "The asteroid appears to have reduced speed again. The President and Mr Luddolmans must be kept up to date. Besides, I'd prefer to see the results from my own staff, rather than relying on the Russians for something as important as this."

"But someone's got to be in tomorrow morning for our images & results, Frank," said Steve. "Besides, I've got a meeting arranged."

"Well un-arrange it then!" the professor replied.

"Hey, hey, Frank, are you okay there?" Steve queried. "Is something bothering you?"

"Only two of the most important men on the planet," said Frank.

"Well, how about Robert?" suggested Steve. "He can check the Russian's

results. I doubt he'll have anything on tomorrow."

Professor Marshall thought about this for a few seconds before Steve added that Robert was almost as qualified to do this as he was.

"Okay," replied Professor Marshall. "Sort this out between you and Rob'. I'm going to get some sleep. Goodnight."

When Professor Marshall awoke at 7.00 am, the first thing he did was to contact Robert, who confirmed that the data received from Moscow was correct. Robert also informed Professor Marshall that the asteroid was now due to come within 1.8 million miles of Earth. However, would that be the final change of movement for the asteroid, or will it reduce speed further, and end up coming closer to Earth? No-one knew. Everybody, both at NASA and in Moscow, was deeply worried. All they could do was to wait for the next set of images and reports.

The data from the International Space Station was received at the usual time that morning, 10.00 am. Steve examined the data thoroughly, before entering the data and calculating the asteroid's speed and trajectory. As soon as the results came through he contacted Professor Marshall.

"Frank, Frank, that asteroid's lost speed again," he told the Professor.

"What's the new trajectory?" the Professor asked.

"800,000 miles," said a worried Steve. "The asteroid will come a little over 800,000 miles from Earth."

"How fast is it traveling at?" asked Professor Marshall.

"It's still moving at a colossal speed," said Steve. "Three Hundred and sixty thousand miles per hour."

"How long will it be before the asteroid approaches Earth's orbit at that rate?" asked the Professor.

"Late March," replied Steve.

"Well at least we have another month to prepare the crew for Operation Armageddon," said the Professor. "The missiles are already prepared, we just need to fit them to the shuttle and carry out some practice for the missions."

"The shuttle isn't supposed to travel 800,000 miles from Earth," said Steve. "That's very nearly four times the distance of the Moon."

"If the asteroid comes to about 800,000 miles from Earth we may not need to launch the shuttle," said the Professor. "I'm worried that the asteroid will come closer, a lot closer. It's movements and motions have changed so many times, I often doubt if it is an asteroid."

"You don't think it's a ship carrying aliens?" Steve queried.

"I don't know, Steve," said the Professor. "Stranger things have happened. If you'd asked me six months ago whether an asteroid could travel at one million miles per hour, I'd have said no. If you'd asked me whether an asteroid could change its speed, I'd have said no, wouldn't you?"

"I guess so," sighed Steve. "Shall I inform the Russians' about the asteroid, or do you want to do the honour?"

"I think you'd better," Professor Marshall advised. "Ask them to send the next set of images over tonight. Robert can come in and double-check the results. Let's hope the asteroid, or whatever it may be, isn't due to come any closer to Earth."

"Shall I inform Dermot at the European Space Agency?" suggested Steve.

"Yes, sure," replied the Professor. "The more people we can get to examine the data, the more help we can get in the coming months. Hopefully, they may find something wrong with the results."

"What about the President?" queried Steve. "Shouldn't you inform him too?"

"I don't think the President is really interested," said the Professor. "I'll let Mr Luddolmans know instead. It'll probably sound better coming from Fred."

After speaking to Fred and making a few more calls, Professor Marshall had a thought, and went back down to Steve's office.

"Steve, when did we start monitoring that asteroid?" he asked.

"September," replied Steve. "Why do you ask?"

"I'd like you to request ISS images in the same area prior to September," the Professor asked. "I'd like you to find earlier images of this asteroid."

"But that'll be like searching for a needle in a haystack," said Steve.

"Maybe," replied the Professor. "Remember though, this asteroid has remained in a similar area of the sky since September. It's on a straight course, there have been slight movements, and they're not due to the Earth's orbit."

"I suppose I can find our first image of the asteroid and calculate it's previous movements," muttered Steve. "We know it was travelling at over a million miles per hour before smashing into the Kuiper belt."

"Supposedly," said the Professor.

"How do you mean?" asked Steve.

"If that thing is an asteroid we may detect where precisely it came from, whether there may have been an impact from the Oort cloud, and how fast it was traveling at earlier," replied the Professor. "I'm not convinced that thing is an asteroid."

"Could it be a phenomenon we don't yet know about?" suggested Steve.

"I don't know," replied the Professor. "I really don't know."

Just at the time, Clint Williams had been walking past. He heard the Professor and Steve in discussion and listened to them while the door was open. He'd become interested in astronomy and was very curious in their discussion. As the Professor was about to leave the room, Clint walked away so no-one was any wiser. However, in the canteen at lunchtime, he saw Steve eating at his table, so took the opportunity to join him.

"Hi doc'," he greeted him. "You don't mind if I sit here, do you?"

"No, of course not," said Steve. "By the way, you can call me Steve. How's the training going?"

"Okay," replied Clint. "I hear you may require my services soon."

"We may well indeed," said Steve. "That asteroid seems to be coming a lot closer to Earth than we had first anticipated."

"How close is it perceived to come now?" asked Clint.

"800,000 miles," Steve informed Clint. "Somehow, I think we haven't heard the last of this, either."

"Do you reckon it will come any closer?" asked Clint.

"I don't know," replied Steve. "It's movements have become rather erratic to say the least."

"Why is that?" Clint asked curiously.

"I simply don't know," replied Steve. "The asteroid may have smashed into other asteroids, meteorites or comets along the way, but it's speed is like something from a science-fiction movie."

"Has it been travelling at light-speed?" queried Clint. "Do you think there could be aliens?"

"I don't know," said Steve. "You seem rather interested in this all of a sudden?"

"Well, over recent months, I've had a lot of time to read books on astronomy, when I'm not training for the shuttle," replied Clint. "I've

become fascinated in outer space. There are some things which are astounding – I never realised how many factors have contributed to our world.”

“And to us being here,” added Steve.

“Indeed,” said Clint. “I used to think there must be some other life forms out there somewhere, but realising the vast distances between the stars makes me appreciate just how long it would take other civilisations to travel to Earth.”

“Well that's largely what makes this asteroid so abnormal,” said Steve. “It's been traveling at speeds we've never envisaged. It's taken 4 months to get from Pluto to Mars – our missions to the outer planets have taken several years to travel the same distance.”

“I still believe there is life out there somewhere,” said Clint. “We've just got to be aware if and when they're approaching Earth.”

“And whether they're friend or foe,” added Steve.

“Do you think this could be some super-human race?” asked Clint.

“Personally, I don't think so,” replied Steve. “On the other hand, this asteroid has broken some fundamental rules by such excessive margins that I wouldn't rule anything out. Not even aliens from outer space.”

“I've heard that the Europeans want to visit the asteroid,” Clint queried.

“I don't think they'll do that now, not when they hear just how close this thing is coming,” replied Steve, before trying to change the subject. “By June you may become a household name.”

“Why's that?” asked Clint.

“The asteroid's due to make it's closest rendezvous with Earth in May,” Steve told him. “You'll be the man to knock it off it's course.”

“Well if I do do that, I'll just be doing my job,” said Clint.

“Just like Neil Armstrong all those years ago,” said Steve.

“And just like me and many others did in the Gulf,” added Clint.

“I didn't know you served in Vietnam,” queried Steve. “You look too young to have been to Vietnam.”

“I was only 18 when I went to Vietnam,” said Clint. “I was one of the last men sent out there.”

After brief conversations on a few other items, Clint finished his meal.

“Are you having desert?” he asked Steve.

“No I'm afraid I'd better not,” replied Steve before looking at his watch. “Is that the time?”

“You sound rather busy?” Clint queried.

“I've got a project for Professor Marshall,” said Steve. “I'll probably be

gone when you come back, but no doubt I'll see you again sometime."

Steve went back to his office soon afterwards. He had already examined the ISS images from August, but had identified all the stars in the picture (and there were thousands). He couldn't identify the asteroid in the images anywhere. He was now double-checking everything, but still every tiny spec on the images was accounted for. He contacted Professor Marshall to notify him of this.

"Frank, I can't find anything that may be the asteroid," he told the Professor.

"Nothing at all?" queried the Professor. "Can you get enlarged images?"

"I can try," replied Steve. "It's not really an enlarged image I need, just one with more detail."

"Well contact the ISS anyway," suggested Professor Marshall. "Perhaps they can get the images magnified."

"It doesn't help that we don't have any reports to go with the images," said Steve. "Even if we can get more detailed images, it's going to be like searching for a needle in mountain."

"I know, I know," replied the Professor. "I want to get to the bottom of this though. How old are the images – how much older than our earliest copies?"

"One week," said Steve. "August 25th 2006."

"Request images for the same area 5 days later," suggested the Professor. "We've got to try something."

"I'll see what I can do," said Steve. "I can't promise anything though."

Steve requested the images from the same area of the solar system on August 30th, and within the next hour he received them. It was now 2.00 in the afternoon though, and he hadn't yet started his main workload for the day. A couple of hours later, Professor Marshall called into the office.

"Have you managed to find anything yet?" he asked.

"Well, I may have found which specs can't be accounted for, that's not too far away from where we'd expect this asteroid to be" replied Steve. "I haven't managed to look through too much of this image though – there are so many tiny specs to sort and identify that I don't think I'll get this done until tomorrow."

"Could you stay back a bit later today?" the Professor asked Steve, who simply stared at him.

"Frank, I've been looking at tiny specs all day long," he told the Professor.

"I have a headache, my eyes are aching and I need a rest."

"Could you stay just a little later, if I can get Robert to come in at 6 tonight," Professor Marshall requested. "You can show Rob what you've been doing and he can sort the rest of the images."

"Maybe, maybe," replied Steve. "If you want Rob to come in at 6' you'd better call him now then."

"I'll see what I can do," said the Professor. "If one of those specs that can't be accounted for is the asteroid, have you any idea how fast it may have been traveling at?"

"Not really," said Steve. "This image has been magnified seven times already, so I guess it must have been traveling very, very fast. If you can get Rob to come in, perhaps he can do the calculations."

"I'll call Rob, and let you know if he can make it in at 6'," the Professor told him.

After a little persuasion, Robert agreed to come in at 6 pm. Steve showed Rob what he'd been doing and asked him to note any spec which couldn't be identified. Later that evening, at 10.30, Professor Marshall eagerly called Robert.

"How are things going?" he asked. "Have you managed to identify everything on those images from August 30th?"

"Just about," replied Robert. "The only item outstanding is one tiny spec Steve referred to earlier."

"Have you calculated what speed it was traveling at?" asked the Professor.

"Well, taking into account the magnification of these images, the time between this and our earliest image, and assuming this is the asteroid, I reckon it will have been traveling at an average speed of 18 million miles per hour," Robert told him.

"Have you double-checked this?" the Professor queried.

"Not yet," replied Robert. "I have calculated it's speed from our earliest image. We estimated it was traveling at 1 million miles per hour after it had smashed into the Kuiper belt. We knew it was traveling faster before this, but I don't think we appreciated by how much."

"Go on, go on," Professor Marshall said to Robert curiously, awaiting the results eagerly.

"Up to 5 million miles per hour," said Robert. "That's why the ISS reassessed their initial estimates. You remember, they first suggested it was traveling too fast to hit Earth, but then amended their assessments."

Professor Marshall was astounded. In one way he was vindicated at

trying to find the asteroid on previous images, but from the other point of view couldn't find any explanation for the asteroid's speed. Was the spec Robert and Steve had been looking at the asteroid in question? Was it an asteroid?

"Frank, I've also received Moscow's latest images and reports of the asteroid," Robert told the Professor.

"And what do they indicate?" asked the Professor.

"You won't like this, but they suggest the asteroid is now due to come within 200,000 miles of Earth," said Robert.

"That's closer than the moon," said the Professor. "What's the latest date for it's closest rendezvous with Earth?"

"The latest date we're looking at is May 5th," replied Robert.

"What's the asteroid's current speed?" asked the Professor.

"A little under 200,000 miles per hour," said Robert.

The professor thought to himself for a few moments.

"Rob, don't worry about double-checking those images for now," he suggested. "You probably have plenty of your own work outstanding – just sort that out for now, put it all in my office and I'll double-check the images tomorrow."

The next morning, Professor Marshall went in to work early. He studied the images carefully, matching all spots and specs to various known stars, nebulae and galaxies. As Robert and Steve had noticed, only one tiny spec remained outstanding. Then, at 10.30, there was a knock on his office door. Professor Marshall invited the person to come in.

"Hi Frank, did Rob manage to sort all those items on the images I got hold of last night?" asked Steve.

"Oh yeah, I'm just double-checking them," replied the Professor. "I haven't quite finished yet, but it seems that spec you referred to was the only one which was unidentified."

"Is there any problem?" asked Steve.

"No, not really," replied the Professor. "I just want to see this data for myself. Did you check how fast the asteroid was traveling at on our first image?"

"No," replied Steve.

"5 million miles per hour, according to Rob," said the Professor. "If his figures are correct, it will have been traveling at nearly 20 million mph on this image."

Steve was astounded. At the same time, Clint was walking past the office.

Again, he stopped to hear what Steve and Professor Marshall were discussing.

"There haven't been any big explosions to any of our local stars recently, have there?" Steve queried.

"Not that I'm aware of," said the Professor. "Sirius is still around at night, still the brightest star in the sky. I shouldn't think Alpha Centauri has changed either, otherwise we'd have heard about it in Australia."

"And most of the other close stars are too small to cause an explosion that would send an asteroid traveling at those sort of speeds," said Steve.

"Well, Proxima' and Barnards' are dead stars," emphasised Professor Marshall. "Personally, I don't think this is an asteroid."

"So what should we do?" Steve asked.

"Nothing at this moment," replied the Professor. "Let's just hope this asteroid doesn't come any closer. Perhaps we can then put this episode to sleep. Speaking of which, do you have the latest results of the asteroid?"

"Yeah, that's what I came here to tell you," Steve told him rather positively. "I've just received the latest data from the ISS, and after double-checking it, it seems the asteroid's movements are beginning to stabilise."

"Is it still due to come about 200,000 miles from Earth?" asked the Professor.

"It's speed has reduced slightly, but not enough to panic any further about," replied Steve. "It's now due to come about 196,000 miles from Earth, to be precise."

"Good, good," said Professor Marshall. "Do you mind if I get on sorting this? I'll come to your office later."

"Whatever you say, Frank," Steve said to him. "See you later."

Clint, who was becoming more and more curious about the asteroid, walked away as soon as he heard Steve approaching. He then waited at the lift nearby, to where Steve was heading. Clint then asked Steve all about the asteroid, to which Steve told him that everything was in order and was going okay.

Clint began to wonder what was going on, and knew Steve was hiding something. He suspected there was more to the asteroid, and that maybe somebody or something was approaching Earth.

Armageddon Revisited

Christmas 2006 soon came and went, as did new year. The asteroid was now traveling at a constant speed, and was due to come to it's closest point to Earth on May 5th 2008.

Clint and Major-General Cornelius Smith continued to train as astronauts for the space shuttle destroyer. It had been decided that the asteroid was due to come too close to Earth to ignore the matter, and that this would be an opportunity to test the planet's defences.

Everything was ready for the shuttle launch on May 3rd, but on May 2nd, the data from Moscow suggested that asteroid's speed reduced again. The shuttle was prepared and launched immediately. As it sped above Earth's atmosphere, however, the latest data from the International Space Station was received. When Steve checked this data, the asteroid appeared to reduce speed again.

At this point it was arranged for the shuttle destroyer to dock with the ISS. The asteroid continued to reduce it's speed, until it reached 10,000 mph on May 5th, at 600,000 miles from Earth. It now seemed that the asteroid would not collide with Earth, as the Earth would have gone past the course of the asteroid when it was due to cross Earth's orbit. The panic seemed to be over, as the President told Fred to instruct the shuttle destroyer to come back down to Earth.

"Are you sure?" queried Fred.

"Yes, I am sure," replied the President. "This matter has been dragging on for too long now. It seems Frank at NASA can't decide how fast this asteroid's traveling at, or how close it'll come to Earth."

"That's because this isn't your usual asteroid," insisted Fred.

"According to that crackpot at NASA," said the President. "I'm surprised you let him take you in like that. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that asteroid's can't change speed or change course."

"The asteroid hasn't changed course," Fred replied.

"Well why do they keep changing their minds how close this asteroid is due to come, huh?" asked the President.

"That's because the asteroid has been reducing speed, whereas Earth revolves around the sun at a constant speed," explained Fred. "Imagine approaching a roundabout. If you enter the junction at the same time and same speed as another vehicle, you're going to crash into eachother."

"Yeah, so what's that got to do with asteroid's?" asked the President.

"If you drive slower, your vehicle will enter the junction later and not crash into the other vehicle," explained Fred.

"So, now the asteroid isn't due to crash into Earth, what are you so

worried about?" asked the President. "You don't think it's gonna pick up speed or change course, do you?"

"No, not really, I suppose," mumbled Fred. "I just don't think it's worth bringing the shuttle back just yet, that's all."

The President began questioning Fred again.

"I think there's more to this asteroid than meets the eye," Fred commented. "I don't think Frank will be too happy about this, either."

"Frank Marshall isn't the President of the United States," the President pointed out. "Look Fred, I know you mean well, but I need you elsewhere."

"I suppose so," said Fred.

"I know so," said the President. "I know you've always been brighter than me, but trust me, on this one,"

"I suppose you're right," sighed Fred. "I'll ring Frank now."

As anticipated, Professor Frank Marshall wasn't too happy.

"This asteroid has been behaving very strangely," insisted the Professor.

"I would never have believed an asteroid could change speed, but there are good reasons for what we've witnessed."

"I know, Frank, I know, you've told me several times before," Fred told him. "These are the President's instructions, I'm afraid."

"Our President is two dimes short of a dollar," the Professor commented.

"You didn't hear that from me, by the way, but can't you persuade him to at least keep the shuttle on stand-by with the ISS?"

"I've tried," said Fred. "It's no good, he won't budge."

"I know he doubts all the stats we've come out with for the asteroid, but it's not as though we're alone," pointed out the Professor. "The Russian Space Federation and the European Space Agency have backed our data."

"I know, Frank, I know," said Fred. "I'm no rocket scientist, but I agree with everything you've told me. I've tried to persuade him, but the final decision lies with the President."

"I suppose we do have a second shuttle on stand-by," said the Professor.

"Can we keep it on stand-by?"

"As far as I'm concerned that's okay," said Fred.

"Thanks," said the Professor. "I'd be grateful if you don't tell the President."

"I won't tell the President," said Fred. "In the meantime, can you speak to Moscow."

"Yes sure," said the Professor. "I believe they have the craft which was meant for a comet on stand-by too. Let's hope it's not needed. Nor the second shuttle."

Professor Marshall instructed the shuttle's crew to return to Earth, stating that they probably wouldn't be needed. However, by the following day, the asteroid began to behave strangely once again.

"Frank, Frank, you won't believe this," cried Steve from his phone. "The asteroid – it's now picked up speed. If it continues at it's current rate it will be heading directly for Earth!"

"What!" shrieked Professor Marshall. "This isn't a wind-up, is it?"

"No, I wish it was just a prank, Frank," bemoaned Steve. "I've checked this, Rob has checked it, you can come and check it for yourself."

"Have you notified Moscow?" asked the Professor.

"Not yet," said Steve. "I'll do it right away."

Professor Marshall went quickly to Steve's office. Whilst he was checking the data again, a call came in from Moscow to verify that the asteroid was heading for Earth.

"Has the shuttle left the ISS yet?" Professor Marshall asked Steve.

"I'm afraid so," he replied. "I've asked control to contact them immediately, and put them through to my office."

Steve's phone then rang. It was Randy Jones of the shuttle destroyer.

"How far towards Earth are you at this present moment?" Steve asked.

"Is there any chance you can turn back?"

"I'm afraid that's not really possible," said Randy. "We're in the lower ionosphere and traveling too fast to change course. We're due to prepare for the final descent."

"But the asteroid has increased speed and is heading for Earth," Steve pointed out.

"Is the second shuttle still on stand-by?" Randy asked Steve.

Professor Marshall nodded at Steve to emphasise that this was the case.

"Okay, we'll send the second shuttle destroyer later today," said Steve.

"Thanks anyway, over and out."

"How long will it take to prepare the rockets for the second shuttle destroyer?" the Professor asked Steve.

"They'll require a quick examination first, but all should be ready in about three hours," said Steve.

"Tell the crew to prepare for mission Armageddon," instructed Professor Marshall. "The weather should be fine so they should be able to lift-off this

afternoon.”

The second shuttle destroyer was to be piloted by Clint. The rocket was bigger than usual, with more fuel to send the shuttle further than just to the International Space Station. Clint’s original co-pilot had been excused, however, and someone else had to partner him, as the shuttle had to be sent up as soon as possible, regardless of how long it had to wait for the asteroid. Cornelius volunteered to be co-pilot, and was assigned to go with Clint, and by 14.00 that afternoon, he and Clint went into the shuttle destroyer. They sat waiting as the countdown to lift-off was announced.

“5, 4, 3, 2, 1, lift-off, we have lift off,” was the announcement at NASA. “Lift-off of the space shuttle destroyer is successful.”

Both Clint and Cornelius were silent, as they shook in their seats while the rockets launched them high, high, and higher into the sky. One minute quickly became two, which quickly became three minutes. Clint and Cornelius looked at each other.

“Are you okay?” Cornelius said to Clint.

“A little shaken, but none the worse,” replied Clint, as he held the throttle.

“I can already see the curvature of the planet,” said Cornelius as he looked through his window.

“I don’t want to tempt fate, but it looks as though we’ve made it past the first stage,” said Clint as he saw the first two rocket boosters fall. “At least we’ve lasted longer than Challenger.”

“We can loosen our belts in a few minutes,” said Cornelius.

“We can, but I think it better if we wait until the second set of rocket boosters have gone,” Clint advised him, before calling NASA to assure them everything was fine.

Cornelius began to lose his premonitions, and became excited at the thought of his responsibility, to help save Earth from potential destruction. As he looked through his window, he could see Earth getting smaller and smaller. As the second set of rocket boosters fell to Earth, Clint undid his belt. Cornelius followed suit. The two of them then smiled at each other and shook hands.

“Do we have any back-up?” asked Cornelius.

“Apparently, NASA are now notifying Moscow that we’ve taken off successfully,” Clint told him. “The Russians will then send one of their ships to the ISS. They’ll stay there as back-up.”

“Hopefully, they won’t be needed,” said Cornelius.

“Hopefully,” said Clint. “I’m told they have some sort of laser on their ship,

but Steve at NASA sounds sceptical whether it can be effective.”

“How many Big Bessy missiles do we have?” asked Cornelius.

“Two,” replied Clint. “We’ve got to make sure we hit our target.”

“What about the other shuttle?” queried Cornelius.

“That’ll depend on whether it needs maintenance and how long it takes to re-fuel,” replied Clint. “I’m afraid that if we’re unsuccessful and the Russians aren’t effective, NASA may not have enough time to use the second shuttle.”

“It shouldn’t need a maintenance check,” commented Cornelius. “It was checked less than a week ago.”

“NASA don’t want another Challenger on their hands,” Clint told him.

“Never mind Challenger, man, that shuttle should be launched as soon as necessary, to save the Earth,” replied Cornelius.

“Never mind Columbia you mean,” said Clint. “If the other shuttle goes the way of Challenger, it’ll never have the opportunity to destroy this asteroid. Let’s hope the second shuttle won’t be required.”

As the shuttle destroyer went through the upper atmosphere and into the realms of space, a strange feeling came over Clint, like he was to meet a long-lost brother. Then, as Cornelius walked down the shuttle to check the hatch, Clint thought he heard something.

“Control, did you call?” he called down to Houston. “NASA, do you read me, over?”

“Are you okay Clint, over?” asked Professor Marshall at the other end.

“We’re fine,” replied Clint. “Did you say something a minute ago, over?”

“No,” said the Professor. “Is everything okay up there, over?”

“Everything’s fine here,” Clint told him. “It must have been some disturbance, over.”

Cornelius came back to his seat, and read the co-ordinates and speed to Professor Marshall.

“You do realise that we’re not likely to return to Earth,” Clint said to Cornelius.

“I had thought about that,” Cornelius replied. “To be quite honest, I haven’t much to live for anymore.”

Clint was very surprised at what he had just heard.

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t had much luck these past few years,” Cornelius told Clint. “You see a big, strong commander on the outside, but inside.....well, inside I feel like a wreck at times.”

“I didn’t think you had many problems,” Clint said to him. “You’re still young, I’d have thought you’ve still got the best of your life ahead of

you.”

“You know, seven years ago, I would have agreed with you,” said Clint.

“Then my father was diagnosed with cancer, about six years ago.”

“I didn't know,” replied Clint. “I'm sorry to hear that.”

“That was just the beginning,” said Cornelius. “My Ma began to act strangely. Pa said it was nothing at first, but my sister Jenna and I arranged for Ma to be checked over. That was when we found out she had Alzheimers'.”

Clint was silent, and had a lot of sympathy for his colleague.

“Pa said he could look after Ma,” said Cornelius. “It was okay at first. He had radiation treatment and his condition improved. Jenna wasn't too far away and went to help. Until Pa had a stroke.”

“Couldn't Jenna look after your mother after that?” asked Clint.

“If only it was that simple,” commented Cornelius. “By that time, Ma was too far gone. We had all sorts of problems just getting Ma into a hostel. Pa remained in hospital for three months, and by that time there were new tenants at his home. First he went with Jenna for a while until it got too much for her.”

“Why was that?” asked Clint.

“Jenna was just a single parent,” said Cornelius. “What made things worse was her son, Aemon.”

“Was he ill?” asked Clint.

“I'd wished he was,” commented Cornelius. “He was into drugs, he was always getting into trouble. One night another gang came and set fire to Jenna's home.”

“Was she alright?” asked Clint.

“She was taken to hospital, but died two weeks later,” said Cornelius.

“Pa, would you believe it, was rescued first, and after a week came to stay with me.”

“And your nephew?” Clint asked.

“He turned himself in,” said Cornelius. “He decided it was better to stay in jail than live with the threat of being burned alive, or worse. I reckon he actually felt some remorse after Jenna died.”

“Is your father still alive?” asked Clint.

“No,” replied Cornelius. “He passed away a couple of years ago. His cancer returned, and by that time he was too weak to have chemotherapy.”

Clint tried to change the subject, but Cornelius just continued to pour his heart out.

"Ma died a few months earlier," Cornelius explained. "I went to visit her, but Ma was never the same. She just seemed worse each time I went to see her."

"Don't you have any other family?" asked Clint.

"I have a brother, Marlon, but I don't talk about him," said Cornelius.

"Why?" asked Clint. "Doesn't he keep in touch?"

"It's difficult keeping in touch with someone in Virginia penitentiary," commented Cornelius. "He's been there almost twenty years now."

A call then came through on the receiver.

"Control to shuttle, control to shuttle, are you receiving me, over," cried a voice.

"Shuttle here, over," replied Clint.

"Is everything okay up there, over?" asked Steve back in control.

"We're fine, over," Clint replied.

"We've requested hourly reports from the ISS for the asteroid," said Professor Marshall at the other end of the line, this time. "It appears that the speed at which it's traveling, you'll probably be able to shoot the missiles in good time, and return to the ISS, over."

Clint asked Cornelius to check the shuttle destroyer's fuel and speed.

"Can you see the asteroid?" asked Professor Marshall.

"I can see something odd on screen, over," replied Clint, before referring the matter to Cornelius.

"I'm increasing the screen image and can see what appears to be a long, narrow asteroid," Cornelius told the Professor. "I'm going to send the picture to control. Can you confirm this is what we're after, over."

As the picture was received in Control, Steve nodded to the Professor, confirming that the asteroid the shuttle destroyer was seeking to deflect was indeed in view.

"Now, this is the important bit, so listen to me very carefully, both of you, over," the Professor advised Clint and Cornelius.

"We can hear you loud and clear, over," they each replied.

"The missile launcher has a timer," explained the Professor. "You must fire the first missile when it says there are thirty minutes before it's due to impact on the asteroid, over."

"But I thought the missile only has twenty minutes before impact, over," queried Cornelius.

"That's correct," replied the Professor. "We don't want to destroy the asteroid, despite the shuttle's title, merely to deflect it, over."

"What about the second missile, over?" asked Clint.

“You should only use that if the first missile has no or very little effect, if the asteroid is still on course to hit Earth,” instructed the Professor. “That will mean that you'll only have ten minutes or less to fire the second missile and get away from the asteroid, over.”

“As I understand it, we can deviate our course after the first missile, and if necessary, fire the second missile sideways-on from the asteroid,” suggested Clint.

Professor Marshall looked at a couple of the shuttle destroyer's engineers and handed his microphone to Steve, while he discussed the suggestion.

“I'm finding it difficult to tell the precise speed of this asteroid, over,” said Cornelius.

“I know, I know,” said Steve. “It seems to be changing speed as it's moving. We're monitoring it's movements here in Control – I'll let you know if you need to fire the missile in advance, over.”

Professor Marshall then took the microphone, and asked to speak to Clint.

“I've spoken to engineers, and they confirmed that you can manoeuvre the shuttle destroyer, but it isn't advisable, over,” Professor Marshall advised.

“I've studied this craft in training, and I know I can manoeuvre it,” Clint said confidently. “I've flown and manoeuvred many aircraft and I know I can manoeuvre this. Let's just hope it doesn't come to that, over.”

“We thought it may be more advisable to use the retro boosters, over,” Professor Marshall suggested to Clint.

“I don't think we'd have enough fuel to turn the shuttle' around, and get back to the International Space Station, over,” replied Clint.

“If you want to turn back after the first missile strike, we can ask the Russians to send their craft up right away, over,” said the Professor.

“Would they have enough time, over?” asked Clint.

Steve and Professor Marshall worked out how much time the Russians had. Moscow was nine hours ahead of Houston, but the launch site, which was in Kazakhstan, was a further three hours ahead, meaning it was now approaching 6.00 am there, which gave them an hour to prepare for lift-off. Fortunately, as Professor Marshall quickly spoke to Professor Kamilichenko, it was confirmed that the Russians were already preparing their rockets. Professor Kamilichenko also explained that the weather would be fine, and that their rocket was due to take off at 7.15 am.

“The Russians are currently preparing for lift-off, over,” Steve then told Clint.

“How long will that be, over?” asked Clint.

"One hour and a half, approximately, over," said Steve.

"Will they have long enough to get above the Earth, over?" asked Cornelius.

"According to our current calculations, you've got another five hours before missile deadline," Steve informed him. "That should be enough time for the Russian craft to get to the asteroid, over."

Another colleague then came along and tapped Professor Marshall on his shoulder, before handing him a new report. He then took the microphone from Steve again.

"I've just received the good news that the first shuttle destroyer has landed safely at Cape Canaveral," he told Clint and Cornelius. "I'll instruct staff to re-fuel the shuttle and be put on stand-by, over."

"Thanks for the news, but at the moment we don't want to think about any other craft on stand-by or back-up," said Clint. "Right now, it's our mission to deflect the asteroid and we mustn't think of anything else, over."

Cornelius was in full agreement.

The Interstellar Pilgrim, meanwhile, was coming closer and closer to its intended destination. Major Retono was preparing to lead a small group to ZR3, while Commander Ondichi sat with others in the control room, carefully watching the screen. As he watched, he noticed a small object gradually becoming larger and brighter.

"Lieutenant Harchett, increase the screen dimensions," he asked.

"Which one do you want increased?" Lieutenant Harchett asked.

"Bottom left corner, please, where that small object lies," the Commander ordered.

When the screen was increased, he became more and more curious.

"Lieutenant, what does that object seem to you?" he asked.

"Is it a craft of some sort?" queried the Lieutenant.

"Hhmmmm," Commander Ondichi muttered, "that's what I thought. Perhaps life on ZR3 is more advanced than we had imagined."

Commander Ondichi then notified Major Retono of this. He instructed the Major to remain on stand-by. The Commander also notified Professor Schmidt and Major Kong, and called them to control. By the time they arrived, the object had become larger and brighter still. They all agreed that it was a craft sent up from ZR3.

"Do you want me to lead my fighter crew to destroy that craft?" Major Kong queried.

"No, not yet," ordered the Commander. "Professor, go to your lab, see if

you can determine if anyone's on-board the craft, and if so, what do they want. We shouldn't presume all intelligent life is alien and violent."

"Why don't you send a message to the craft," suggested Professor Schmidt.

"Yes, why not," the Commander said to himself, before ordering to Lieutenant Harchett to do so. "See if we get any reply."

On the shuttle destroyer, Clint had taken off his earphones for a while. Cornelius, however, heard a brief ultra-low pitched sound. It continued to ring in his, as he seemed to sit stationary for minutes.

"Corny', are you okay?" Clint asked him with due concern.

"Gee, man, what was that??" said Cornelius.

"What was what?" asked Clint.

"That sound I just heard," replied Cornelius. "I ain't heard anything like it."

"Like what?" asked Clint.

"A very, very low sound," said Cornelius. "It was like an electric shock going through my ears."

Clint became rather concerned.

"I hope it wasn't a solar flare or gamma ray burst," he said to Cornelius. "I think you'd better give the shuttle an emergency checkover – make sure no wiring, sockets or connections are damaged. It'll mean going to auxiliary power."

"Okay," said Cornelius. "Tell me when the shuttle's on auxiliary. In the meantime, I'm going to notify Control."

"Try to contact the International Space Station instead," suggested Clint.

"See if they were affected in any way."

Cornelius contacted the ISS. They said they hadn't noticed anything, but that they were on the other side of Earth at the time.

On the Interstellar Pilgrim, they were a little surprised not to have received any reply.

"Shall I lead my fighter crew to attack that craft now, Commander?" Major Kong queried.

"I don't think attacking other life, man or machine, will do any good in this instance," Commander Ondichi told him, before calling Professor Schmidt.

"Can you clarify if there are life forms on that craft, yet?"

"I can indeed, Commander," said Professor Schmidt. "There are two humans, each male. One is light pink, the other brown. The two males are talking to each other. They may also be communicating to others on ZR3."

"Can you understand what they are saying?" asked Commander Ondichi.
"Not really," said Professor Schmidt. "They seem to be on a different wavelength, much lower than ours."
"What is the craft like inside?" asked Commander Ondichi.
"Rather like our control room," said Professor Schmidt.
"Professor, continue to monitor the men," instructed the Commander. "I think perhaps we should leave them for a while,"

Back at NASA Control, Professor Marshall was getting worried, as he spoke to one of the shuttle destroyer's designers.

"That checkover they're carrying out on the shuttle, shouldn't it be completed by now?" he asked.

"It should be," said the designer. "It's the first time this has had to be done, so perhaps there's a few teething problems. Give them a few more minutes."

As they were talking, the Professor saw Steve waving his hand in the air, calling him over. The shuttle destroyer was back on line.

"Is everything okay up there, Corny, over?" Steve asked.

"Everything appears to be fine," said Cornelius. "Clint and me have reviewed the results and we're not really sure what happened, over."

"Are there any signs of gamma ray bursts, or of x-rays or solar flares, over?" Steve asked him.

"No," Cornelius replied. "The only sign of any disturbance seems to have come from the asteroid, over."

"I don't like it," said Professor Marshall, who had come over and heard what had happened. "That's no asteroid. If it is I'll eat my Ten Gallon'."

"How long do we have before firing the missile?" Cornelius asked Steve. "I make it three hours, over."

"I've been checking the asteroid's movements, and it seems to have picked up speed a little," Steve informed Cornelius. "I make it you have two hours and forty minutes until firing time. The fact that you had to reduce speed for the checkover suggests we may have to refine the timescales again, over."

"I'll amend our timescales for firing to two hours and thirty minutes," Cornelius told Steve. "If it gets below that timescale you'd better let me know, over."

A colleague came along and handed Professor Marshall a new report from Moscow.

"Corny, I've just received word from Moscow that the Russians have

launched their rocket," said the Professor. "I've not been informed precisely where they are just at this minute, but we'll keep you informed, over."

"We'll try to keep an eye out for them, over," replied Cornelius.

"You may want to keep in contact with the Russians," suggested the Professor. "I understand one of the crew, Valerie, speaks English, over."

"Thanks, Frank, over and out," said Cornelius.

As Clint and Cornelius proceeded in the shuttle destroyer they became more and more tense. That was until Cornelius began to hear another ultra-high-pitched sound in his earphone. It seemed relatively quiet at first, but got louder and louder. The sound became higher and higher still, higher than the other sound he'd heard earlier. Cornelius clenched his fists tighter and tighter.

"Corny, are you okay?" asked a bemused Clint. "What's the matter?"

The sound was deafening, as Cornelius began to scream. He managed to grab his earphone and threw it to the floor. The noise was so low that Clint could hear it, so he kicked it as far down the corridor as he could.

"Are you okay Corny?" Clint asked.

Cornelius was still shaking. He stared at Clint and managed to get his breath back.

"That, that, sound, that noise," he said.

"I heard it too, when you threw the earphone down," said a worried Clint, before looking down the corridor. "I can't hear anything from your earphone from here, so it may be quiet again."

Clint walked down the corridor to pick up Cornelius's earphone. He could hear something on the other end of the line. It was NASA Control.

"Come in Corny, come in, over," Steve was saying as Clint picked up the earphone.

"Clint here, over," he said to Steve.

"Are you okay, over?" Steve asked. "Where's Corny?"

"Corny's resting for a few minutes. He just had another high-pitched sound come through, over," Clint informed Steve as he described what had occurred.

"Do you want to do another checkover, over?" asked Steve.

"I don't think so, not just yet," said Clint. "I'm just glad I turned my earphone off. I think Corny is just a little shook up, over."

"Let us know if he's not okay," said Steve. "I can tell the Russians, and instruct to launch our second shuttle destroyer, over."

"Hopefully he's okay," said Clint. "I think we'd better switch off our

earphones for now. We'll call you at regular intervals, over and out."

Steve called for silence at NASA Control, and explained to everyone what had happened. Professor Marshall instructed one of his staff to notify Moscow. It seemed that Clint and Cornelius wouldn't be able to maintain contact with the Russian crew, and that Control should keep in close contact with Moscow.

Ten minutes later, a call came through from Cornelius to say that he was okay, but that he and Clint would continue to keep their earphones switched off.

Back on the Interstellar Pilgrim, Commander Ondichi had been expecting a call from the shuttle but had by now given up hope. Major Kong continued to be aggressive, suggesting to lead an attack on the shuttle destroyer. Instead, he called Professor Schmidt to ask of any progress in the monitoring of the shuttle.

"I've been watching the two men in the approaching craft," the Professor informed him. "I don't think our last message went down very well."

"Have you any idea why?" asked Commander Ondichi.

"I believe we're using the wrong frequency," said Professor Schmidt. "It seemed that the higher our message became, the worse one of the men became."

"You say he became worse," asked the Commander. "In what way was that?"

"It seemed to affect his mind," said Professor Schmidt. "Our latest message was in a higher-pitch than the previous one. We should have used a lower frequency."

Commander Ondichi considered what to do next.

"Lieutenant Harchett, sort our frequency out, please," he ordered. "Then try to send another message in a lower frequency."

"Will do, sir," said the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Harchett tried to send a message on a lower frequency. Commander Ondichi expected a reply, but still he heard nothing. All the while, Major Kong was suggesting to attack the shuttle, and that if there was intelligent life it was probably violent and not worth saving. Just as the Commander was about to grant Major Kong his wish a call came through. It wasn't the shuttle, however, but Professor Schmidt.

"Commander, I think I know why we've not received any reply yet," he said.

"Why is that?" Commander Ondichi asked.

"One of the men was wearing something around his ears," Professor Schmidt explained. "He has since removed it. I believe it was probably an old earphone."

"What makes you think that was an earphone?" asked the Commander.

"Because he was the only man who reacted to our message," Professor Schmidt informed him. "The other man was unaffected."

"You say one man reacted to our message," the Commander queried.

"Precisely how did he react?"

"He appeared to be shaking, and eventually threw the earphone on the floor," explained Professor Schmidt. "Since he took it off he's been fine. That's what made me think we were using the wrong frequency."

"What about the second man?" asked the Commander.

"He didn't have an earphone, nor has he put one on since," said Professor Schmidt. "We may be within range to call to them through our minds."

"I'll check with our control and let you know," replied the Commander.

"I also think we overlooked something," Professor Schmidt pointed out.

"Oh," said the Commander. "What's that?"

"We've been travelling at ultra high speeds for eons and eons. This has probably affected our voices in relation to planetary life," explained Professor Schmidt.

"Hhmmm, I see what you mean," said Commander Ondichi.

"Life on ZR3 seems to be much further advanced than anything else we've come across previously," Professor Schmidt emphasised. "If we are to visit ZR3 or contact other life, we will require time to adjust."

"We'll have to orbit around ZR3 for sometime," said Commander Ondichi.

"I'll order Major Retono and his team to abort their intended mission."

As each second went by, the shuttle destroyer was closing in on the asteroid. Clint had his finger on the blaster.

"Are you going to fire?" Cornelius asked him.

"I'm getting ready," he replied. "Give control a call, ask them to confirm if we're within shooting range."

As Cornelius called NASA control, Clint thought he could hear something. After a couple of seconds he heard the same thing again.

"NASA control say we're now within range," Cornelius said to Clint. "You can fire any time now."

Cornelius turned around, and saw Clint in a daze.

"Clint, you can shoot now," he said to him. "Clint, Clint, are you okay?"

Cornelius quickly looked at the missile co-ordinates. It seemed to be

pointing towards the asteroid. He knew the missile wasn't supposed to hit the asteroid directly. He knew it was a nuclear missile surrounded by oxygen, all encased in a solid aluminium tube.

"Clint, Clint, wake up, wake up," he called, but Clint remained in a daze.

Cornelius quickly pressed the red button to release the missile. He then punched Clint in his face in attempt to wake him from the daze.

"Clint, are you okay, speak to me," said Cornelius.

Clint looked at his colleague, shaking his head.

"What happened?" Cornelius asked.

"I don't know," Clint said to him. "I heard something, I can't remember anything else."

"Well we won't have much time to remember much more," Cornelius pointed out. "We're currently following the missile. We've got to get away."

"How much time do we have before it explodes?" asked Clint.

"Seventeen minutes," Cornelius told him.

"That should be enough time to change course," said Clint. "Strap yourself in – I'm going to have to pull away faster than intended."

As the Interstellar Pilgrim came ever closer to it's destination, Commander Ondichi noticed something approaching.

"Have they sent something to us?" he pondered.

"Yeah, sure," replied Major Kong. "They've sent something to us alright – a missile! I said you should have let me out there to deal with them."

As it came ever closer, Commander Ondichi pressed the red alert button. Sirens could be heard all over the Interstellar Pilgrim, as the Commander called the engine room.

"Raise our repellent field," he ordered. "Change course immediately."

"Where to?" asked Captain Jamess.

"Are we going to run away?" commented a rather aggressive Major Kong.

"Put the ship in an orbital mode," ordered Commander Ondichi, before turning towards Major Kong. "We're not running away from this, not after all the time we've taken getting here. Besides, we need more time to analyse ZR3. Life down there seems to be more intelligent than we first imagined."

As Major Kong stormed off, Major Retono entered the flight deck.

"What's the alert, and what's with 'Kong?" asked Major Retono.

"It appears these humans have sent a missile," the Commander explained.

"Major Kong wanted to go out and attack that craft - you know how he

can get like. I've ordered our repellent field to be raised, and that we go into an orbital mode from this point."

"Do you think that's close enough?" asked Major Retono.

"It will have to be," said Commander Ondichi. "I think this will be close enough for our Small Reconnaissance Craft to get to ZR3 okay, don't you?"

Meanwhile, the shuttle destroyer had veered onto a different course and as far away from the asteroid as possible. As it turned at a safe distance, the asteroid could be seen on one corner of their screen. Clint and Cornelius thought, for a few seconds at least, that they saw the asteroid turning as well as moving out of picture.

Then there was an almighty explosion, which shook the shuttle destroyer. It was a good few minutes later before the screen cleared.

"We did it, we did it," Cornelius cheered excitedly.

"I think we'd better call NASA Control first," suggested Clint. "Let's hear what they have to say before we head for the International Space Station."

Cornelius called NASA Control.

"What's happened, what's happened?" he asked. "It looks from here like we've deflected the asteroid. Can you confirm this, over?"

"Yepp, great job boys," replied a very relieved Steve. "It looks like you've deflected the asteroid from here, too. Well done lads. We'll continue to monitor the asteroid from here, over?"

"Weheyyy, weheyyy," cried Cornelius excitedly as he gave Clint a high-five. "We did it, we did it. Woooh-oooooh"

Clint had his earphones on this time and heard the confirmation.

"I've been keeping an eye on our fuel load," Clint said to Steve amidst the celebrations. "We may have enough to get us to the International Space Station, hopefully, over."

"The ISS is about to come into your horizon," Steve told him. "Our data suggests you should be okay, fuel-wise. Do you still have the remaining missile, over?"

"We do, over," said Clint.

"As you know, the asteroid's been behaving very weirdly," replied Steve.

"We may need to use the second missile if the asteroid changes course again. We'll keep you informed, over."

"Do you think we may be needed again, over?" asked Clint.

"We don't wish to rule that out, just yet," said Steve. "You can re-fuel the shuttle while your with the ISS. If everything's okay, you can return to

Earth next week, over.”

“Will do, Steve, over and out,” said Clint, before turning to Cornelius.

“Let's not get too excited just yet.”

New Moon On Monday

The Interstellar Pilgrim was now orbiting Earth. All plans had been suspended following the recent events. However, it was agreed to remain in orbit, in order to get a better understanding of what lay on the planet they knew as ZR3.

Professor Schmidt was in his office, monitoring various frequencies and tracing any images on his screen, when an odd sound was heard. Bonggggghhhhhh! Professor Schmidt quickly tuned in to the frequency and brought up the image on his screen, where he saw a young lady for a second, before various pictures were shown.

“The lunchtime news on Monday May 10th 2008 – Bonggggghhhhhh!

Earth has a new moon. Bonggggghhhhhh!

Dozens killed in Afghanistan suicide. Bonggggghhhhhh!

Is climate change already upon us. Bonggggghhhhhh!

Sport – Beckham signs for Millwall. Bonggggghhhhhh!

Professor Schmidt became very interested, and so recorded the news. A young lady named Laura began reading, while various images appeared on screen.

“NASA have today confirmed that Earth has a new moon,” read the young lady. “It's probably better described as a captured asteroid, which had been approaching Earth. The two-man crew of the latest space shuttle managed to deflect the asteroid off of it's original course, and onto it's now current orbit. It remains to be seen, however, precisely how long the asteroid will remain in orbit. With me in the studio is Professor Stephen Hawking of Cambridge University. Stephen – I understand this isn't your average asteroid.”

“No Laura, indeed it is not,” was the reply from a very strange-looking person, with a robotic voice.

Could he be half-human and half-robot, Professor Schmidt wondered to himself, whilst listening to this person speak.

“This asteroid was first discovered travelling at very, very high speeds,

almost one million miles per hour,” said Stephen Hawking. “By the time it approached Earth, however, it had reduced in speed by 97%.”

“Do we know what caused the asteroid to reduce in speed?” Laura asked him.

“The asteroid probably crashed two or three times in the asteroid belt, between Mars and Jupiter,” explained Stephen Hawking. “However, we cannot say with absolute certainty, as it seemed to continue on its original course.”

“You would have expected the asteroid to be deflected at this point?” Laura queried.

“Yes indeed,” replied Stephen Hawking. “It may be that something travelling at such speed simply knocked anything it came across out of its path. NASA are currently examining its movements to see if this was the case.”

“Doesn't that make it seem odd that the NASA Space Shuttle managed to deflect the asteroid in the end?” asked Laura.

“No, because the asteroid had reduced speed by this time,” explained Stephen Hawking. “If the asteroid had continued at 1 million miles per hour, it would have crossed our orbit at a distance of 12 million miles from Earth. Having reduced speed, for whatever reasons, meant that the asteroid took longer to reach Earth's orbit. By this time, Earth was further along its orbit and much closer to the point at which the asteroid crossed its orbit.”

“Will we be able to see this new moon in the evening sky?” Laura asked.

“Yes, but only as a small star,” said Stephen Hawking. “The asteroid is relatively small, only about eight miles in length by two miles wide. It is fairly reflective for an asteroid, though.”

“Do you believe this should be classified as a moon?” asked Laura.

“No,” replied Stephen Hawking. “However, other planets have captured asteroids with irregular shapes which are classified as moons. This will probably be debated at the next International Astronomical Union meeting.”

“Can you give us some idea of what would have happened if the asteroid had collided with Earth?” Laura asked him.

“Earth, as we know it, would have been destroyed,” Stephen Hawking emphasised. “The impact would first have created the energy of a million Hiroshima atomic bombs. This itself would have killed off between 70 and 85% of all life, depending upon where precisely the impact occurred.”

“Could anyone have survived this impact?” asked Laura.

“Possibly people in the Arctic circle may have escaped the very worst, if the asteroid impacted in Antarctica and if they had moved quickly into very deep bunkers beneath the Earth,” explained Stephen Hawking. “However, they will have had to come to the surface for food at some point after. If the intense heat and radiation did not kill them, the after-effects would most certainly have done so.”

Laura asked Stephen Hawking to elaborate on this.

“Dust and radiation would have left a thick smog in the upper atmosphere,” explained Stephen Hawking. “This would have prevented sunlight from reaching Earth, creating an eventual ice age, far worse than those of the past million years. This would have destroyed all but the hardiest of insects and bacteria.”

“At what distance from Earth does the asteroid orbit?” asked Laura.

“Almost 179,000 miles,” said Stephen Hawking. “The speed of the asteroid's orbit is over four times faster than that of the moon, however, which will probably result in the appearance of a small star moving fairly quickly across the night sky.”

“Has the new moon been given a name yet?” Laura asked Stephen Hawking.

“Not yet,” he replied.

“Can you confirm if the Space Shuttle which deflected the asteroid has returned to Earth yet?” asked Laura.

“No,” replied Stephen Hawking. “The Space Shuttle has since docked with the International Space Station. The crew have been instructed to remain there for the time being, until NASA, in association with the European Space Agency and the Russian Space Federation, are satisfied that the asteroid poses no further danger to Earth.”

“Will we see man on the new moon in the near future?” Laura asked Stephen Hawking.

“The European Space Agency are considering a plan to visit the new moon, but that will not be for some time to come,” he replied.

“Professor Stephen Hawking, thank you,” Laura said to him, before referring to the next item.

Professor Schmidt didn't find the next item as inviting. Amidst an announcement that many people had been killed were pictures of men being carried in stretchers, others with cuts, bruises and bleeding all over. There also appeared to be buildings and large metal objects with four wheels, damaged and destroyed.

Professor Schmidt called Commander Ondichi, to notify him of what he'd

seen. He then invited Major Retono and Professor Wagstaff, along with the Commander, to view the news on the planet below.

"I hear you have some interesting news for us," queried Professor Wagstaff as he came into the room.

"Yes, very interesting indeed," replied Professor Schmidt. "Now you're all here, I'll run the programme."

They found the introductions strange, but each watched with bated breath at what was to come next.

"Isn't that the Interstellar Pilgrim?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"I believe it is," said a curious Major Retono, before referring to Stephen Hawking. "What about that thing in the strange seat - is it a robot? It sounds like one."

"I'm afraid I don't know," said Professor Schmidt.

"I've never come across this type of life-form since I've been monitoring the planet. It's a complete mystery to me."

"Speaking of odd life-forms, where is Major Kong?" asked Professor Wagstaff. "Isn't he coming here?"

Professor Schmidt looked at Commander Ondichi for an answer.

"I've left Major Kong in charge on the control deck," said the Commander.

"From what that robotic man is saying, it would appear there are a lot of different life-forms on ZR3," said Major Retono, changing the subject.

"From what that robotic man is saying, it appears that the craft sent into space was meant to deflect us," suggested Professor Schmidt. "It seems these humans were afraid that the Interstellar Pilgrim was an asteroid about to collide with the planet."

"I suppose that makes sense," Professor Wagstaff muttered. "The Interstellar Pilgrim is built into an asteroid."

"On reflection, I think we can make contact with these humans," said Major Retono. "They seem pretty intelligent, can develop their own machinery, and speak the same language, even."

"May I suggest that you watch the next item, before passing judgement," advised Professor Schmidt.

"Why? What does it contain?" asked Major Retono.

"You'll see," replied Professor Schmidt. "It isn't very inviting."

A scene of carnage soon appeared on the screen, with humans laying dead on the ground. Others were bleeding all over, crying and shouting in a different language altogether, with yet more humans carried in stretchers.

"All that seemed to occur when humans were fighting humans," pointed

out Professor Schmidt. "Not very intelligent at all, I'd say."

"But why?" asked Commander Ondichi with surprise.

"I can't say with any certainty," replied Professor Schmidt. "It seems this was due to different beliefs."

"Did I hear the term 'suicide bomber'?" commented Major Retono. "Isn't that someone who blows themselves up?"

"Yes, I believe it is," confirmed Professor Wagstaff. "Surely no-one would want to kill themselves just because of their beliefs?"

"Strange, very strange," said the Commander. "I think we're going to have to spend sometime in orbit, in order to fully monitor the situation on ZR3."

"You can see why I suggested not to notify Major Kong?" said Professor Schmidt.

"I think we should leave Major Kong out of this for the time being, particularly after his recent outbursts," said Commander Ondichi. "If he saw some of the pictures, he may just try to lead a rogue attack against ZR3."

"I don't think this sort of situation is happening all over the planet," Professor Schmidt assured his colleagues.

"I should hope not," commented Major Retono. "I don't think ZR3 would be worth living on if this sort of thing occurred everywhere. Our forefathers left the planet to get away from horrible creatures, annihilating one another."

"Yes, but I believe they were a lot larger and fiercer than what we've just seen," said Professor Wagstaff.

"Is there much else to come?" asked Commander Ondichi.

"Oh yes," said Professor Schmidt. "Very different again from the last two items. Let's see it all, before jumping to any conclusions."

Back at NASA HQ, everyone was happy and excited. Regular checks of the asteroid over the next week seemed to prove it's orbit, at a constant 178,974 miles from Earth. There was no worry that the asteroid would 'fall' to Earth, and nor did it seem as though it would drift away into space. A few days later, Clint and Cornelius were preparing to depart from the International Space Station. Clint then went quiet all of a sudden.

"Clint, are you okay?" asked Cornelius as he went over to see him. It reminded him of what happened on the shuttle a few weeks earlier, as the asteroid came into sight. "Clint, speak to me, speak to me."

There was no reply. Cornelius called the crew of the International Space Station.

"What's the matter?" asked Jim, one of the crew.

"It's Clint," Cornelius told him. "He's having a turn. Bring a stretcher over."

Jim called to the next crew member, Nikita, who brought the stretcher along. For a brief moment, as Cornelius held him, he seemed to stare into him. Cornelius slapped Clint across his face. Clint's eyes began to go round and round, as he slowly 'awoke'.

"Are you okay?" Cornelius asked him.

"You look like you've just had a fit," Jim told Clint. "You don't have epliepsy by any chance?"

Clint lay in a daze, as Nikita brought a glass of water over for him.

"I don't know what came over me," Clint said to the others. "I've never been like this before."

"Except on the shuttle as we approached the asteroid," Cornelius pointed out. "You said something about hearing voices in your head then."

Clint thought to himself for a moment, trying to recall the incident.

"Now you mention it, I think I remember hearing voices," said Clint.

"You don't have epilepsy?" Jim asked again. "Does anyone in your family have epilepsy?"

"I didn't think Epilepsy was hereditary?" queried Cornelius.

"It's not supposed to be, but I know two families who have epilepsy in more than one generation," Jim told him.

"I think for now we better postpone the shuttle departure," suggested Nikita. "I go and contact NASA, let them know."

Steve was very surprised when the call came through. He asked to speak to Cornelius, who explained what had happened to Clint, and what had happened when they approached the asteroid.

"You never told me Clint went through a 'funny period' on the shuttle, over," a bemused Steve said to Cornelius.

"I'm sorry, but it didn't seem important at the time," he told Steve. "We were facing an asteroid that could have wiped out the Earth. I wacked Clint in the face, and he seemed okay, like normal, a few seconds later, over."

"Was it more serious this time, over?" asked Steve.

"It looked more serious, over," replied Cornelius. "Jim reckons Clint has Epilepsy."

"That's the last thing we need right now," Steve commented. "Is Clint in any condition to pilot the shuttle on return, over?"

"I don't know," said Cornelius. "We'll have to wait and see. Mike's checking him over right now, over."

"Can you pilot the shuttle, over?" Steve asked Cornelius.

"I guess so," said Cornelius. "I'd prefer to have a day's refresher training, over."

"Okay," said Steve. "It looks like we're going to have to postpone the shuttle's return for the time being. I'll speak to Frank, we'll be in touch with you later, over and out."

Steve called Professor Marshall to say he'd cancelled the return flight. The Professor demanded to know why. Were there any problems with the space shuttle destroyer?

"Clint isn't too well at the moment," Steve informed him.

"Why, what's the matter?" Professor Marshall queried.

"Clint may have had a fit," explained Steve. "I didn't think we should risk the shuttle. We don't want another Columbia, do we?"

"Can't Corny pilot the shuttle?" asked the Professor.

"He isn't too confident," said Steve. "Corny asked for refresher training to pilot the shuttle."

"What about Jim, he piloted the previous shuttle," suggested Professor Marshall.

"By the time it'll take for Jim to get prepared, the ISS will be out of range for the shuttle landing," Steve told him.

"Okay, okay," said Professor Marshall. "I suppose it's better to be safe than sorry. I don't want to carry another Columbia disaster on my shoulders – I've had enough to deal with these past months."

The following day, as the International Space Station orbited over the same area of Earth, Jim launched the shuttle destroyer on its return journey. Clint had by now fully recovered and watched behind Jim and Cornelius as they headed towards Earth. The shuttle began to shake as it entered Earth's upper atmosphere.

"Is this normal?" Cornelius asked Jim. "Tell me this ship ain't gonna disintegrate."

"Don't worry," he said. "The shuttle shakes like this on re-entry. Strap yourselves in tight, both of you – this is the most dangerous part of the journey."

Jim smiled and looked at Cornelius.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You know what you've got to do?"

"I'm okay," replied Cornelius. "The sooner we get down there, the better."

Clint was okay too. He didn't have any fits or turns. He sat beside Cornelius. Both they and Jim sat strapped tightly to their seats, their

minds focussed on the dashboard and carefully remembering all the safety procedures. The shuttle destroyer flew safely through the atmosphere, before making a successful landing at Cape Canaveral. As they were each helped off the shuttle, crowds of people watched from a distance, cheering the new saviours of Earth.

All three were exhausted. Jim was led into one car, while Clint and Cornelius were led into another. However, instead of being escorted back to base together, their cars went in different directions. Neither Clint nor Cornelius had been to Cape Canaveral and had no idea what was to come.

"Where are we going?" quizzed Clint. "It looks like we're not going with Jim."

"I've no idea," replied Cornelius. "To be honest, Clint, I couldn't care less at this moment. I just want to go to the shower and change my spacesuit."

As the car proceeded towards what appeared to be a stage, Clint and Cornelius looked at each other. When the car reached the stage, Clint and Cornelius were escorted upon it. There stood the President, together with Fred Luddolmans, Secretary for Defence. Behind them were Professor Frank Marshall, Dr Steve de Pierri and Robert Langman.

The President coughed into the microphone to gain the crowd's attention.

"I'd first like to thank everyone for being here today," the President said to the crowd. "I'm sure you've all heard recent events above the planet, and I'm sure you'd all like to join in with me in congratulating our heroes for saving the world."

The crowd all clapped and cheered along with the President, before he coughed into the microphone.

"Today is a great day for all of us, not just in America but throughout the world," he said. "Today we can rest in peace, safe in the knowledge that we need never fear obstacles from outer space ever again."

Clint put his left arm around Steve, whilst Cornelius leaned on the shoulder of Robert, each trying to rest their weary bodies.

"Thanks to these men behind me, the threat to our planet is no longer," the President continued. "I would first like to thank Major General Cornelius Smith and Flight Commander Clint Williams. Thanks to the skills of these men, the asteroid was deflected away from Earth, so that we can all rest in peace. Thanks to these men we even have a new moon, I believe."

As the crowd clapped once again, Professor Marshall nodded his head to confirm this, before the President called Clint and Cornelius forward and handed medals to both of them.

“Would either of you two gentlemen like to say anything?” the President asked them.

Clint and Cornelius looked at each other, unsure of what to say. Then, while everyone waited, Clint stepped up to the microphone.

“I’m sure you can all appreciate that we’re both a little exhausted at the moment, but I would like to thank my colleague for his help and assistance throughout our mission,” Clint said to the crowd. “I would also like to thank all those who trained us both, above and beyond the call of duty.”

Clint then passed the microphone to Cornelius.

“I would like to echo my colleagues’ sentiments, and to say that I’m proud to be American,” he added.

The crowd cheered ceremoniously as Clint and Cornelius stepped back. The cries didn’t die down until the President came forward and blew into the microphone.

“Thank you ladies and gentlemen, thank you,” he said to gain their attention. “I also wish to pay tribute to Professor Frank Marshall and his team for their careful monitoring of the asteroid. Without their experience and guidance throughout this dangerous episode we may not be here today.”

The President then called Professor Marshall, Steve and Robert forward, before presenting them with medals. Professor Marshall then went up to the microphone.

“May I take this opportunity to thank Steve and Rob for their time, dedication, and effort in identifying the threat to our planet, whatever surprises may have occurred along the way,” he said to the crowd. “I would also like to thank the President and Mr Luddolmans for their full support throughout the past nine months.”

As they stepped back a few paces, the US flag was raised at full mast. The President then came to the microphone once more.

“Once again, the world can thank America for saving this planet,” he said to the crowd. “We do not choose to do what is easy - we choose to do what is necessary, however difficult it may be.”

As the crowd clapped and cheered, Steve quietly asked Clint whether JFK had once said something similar, to which Clint nodded.

The President then continued - “This is the land of the free, and will always remain so. May God bless these heroes, without whom we may not be here today, may God bless you all, and may God bless America, thank you.”

They crowd clapped and cheered again, before everyone on the stage

turned to the US flag, and gave their salutes, as Whitney Houston sang the Star-Spangled Banner. The President and the others were led to three open-topped limousines, as everyone in the crowd waved to them and cheered, as though they had just won the war.

To the crowd and the President, it probably seemed like the United States had won a war. Clint and Professor Marshall were very sceptical however. Steve, Robert, and Cornelius has witnessed enough not to rule out any further odd occurrences. Even Fred Luddolmans wasn't absolutely sure this was the end of the saga.

When they arrived at Cape Canaveral HQ, Clint and Cornelius were escorted to the shower room. New clothes had been left outside the showers for each of them. They were both pleased to take off their space suits, and felt refreshed and clean, and not over-heating.

After their showers, Clint and Cornelius were escorted to the Medical room, to be checked over. While Clint was with the doctor, and Cornelius waited outside, Professor Marshall came along.

"Hi there Corny, welcome back to Earth," the Professor said to him. "You'll have to tell me about mission Armageddon sometime - we didn't get much chance to discuss things backstage."

"Nahh, not really," said Cornelius. "The President's speech didn't last too long, though, thank God. He usually has a lot more to say."

"Perhaps he was thinking of you and Clint," said the Professor. "After all, you must be exhausted."

"You're joking aren't you?" Cornelius commented. "This President only thinks about himself."

Professor Marshall simply grinned.

"I suppose you're Republican?" Cornelius queried. "You must be, or you'd have had a lot to say about this President, wouldn't you?"

"Republican, but with a small 'r'," replied the Professor. "Where's Clint, by the way – with the doctor?"

"Yeah, he should be due out soon," said Cornelius.

"Well, can you tell him, I know a quiet bar not too far away," Professor Marshall told him. "Steve and Rob are coming along with me tonight. You're both welcome to come along too. If you're interested, meet me in reception at 7.30."

Just then, Clint came out of the doctor's office.

"Hi Clint, how are you doing?" Professor Marshall asked.

"Oh, okay," Clint yawned.

"You sound like I feel - like you're in need of a rest," said Cornelius. "What did the doctor have to say?"

"Not a great deal," Clint replied. "I've got to go to NASA HQ in Houston for further checks."

"Is that because of your seizure?" asked Professor Marshall.

"I think so," said Clint. "The thing is, I'm sure that was no epileptic seizure. I'm sure I heard voices of some sort, as though someone was trying to contact me."

"Well, perhaps you might like to tell me all about it tonight," the Professor suggested. "I'm taking Steve and Rob for a meal tonight. You and Corny are both welcome to come along too."

"I might just take you up on that," said Clint. "How about you, Corny?"

"I'm up for it," Cornelius replied, as the doctor invited him into his office.

"I'll see you tonight then," said Clint. "In the meantime, I'm going to the rest room to get some sleep."

By 7.30 that evening, Clint and Cornelius were both feeling a lot better, and had each had a good rest. Like Clint, Cornelius had to have another, more-thorough medical at NASA HQ two days later. He too, thought he was fine, and that the whole episode may not be fully over just yet.

By the (very) end of the evening, all five of them had enjoyed themselves. Rob had tried to pull a few young ladies, while the others were half-drunk. It was a good job the medical was two days later.

At his medical, Cornelius underwent x-rays to check for any radiation which may have been contracted, unknowingly, on the mission. He also had neurological tests on the nerves and brain, to check for signs of any nervous disorder. However, the tests were negative. Cornelius felt relieved, pleased at the thought that he could now go back to his old base in New York State. As he came out of the medical room, he met Clint. After a brief chat, they exchanged telephone numbers and email addresses, shook hands and bid farewell, before Clint went into the medical room.

Clint underwent the same tests as Cornelius. His tests all proved negative, too. Clint felt relieved, not to say vindicated, that there were no signs he had contracted epilepsy. Doctors were still not fully convinced, however, and simply referred to the results as inconclusive. They gave Clint a telephone number to contact, and asked him to report any seizure or nervous attack in the future.

Clint was looking forward to going home and to see his family, whom he

had only briefly visited for a few weekends, plus Christmas and Easter, over the past nine months. Was it that long he had been away, he wondered?

Before going home however, Clint had one final appointment at Houston, to meet Fred Luddolmans at the Marriott hotel.

"Good afternoon," he said to the lady on reception. "Could you tell where the Eagle Conference room is?"

"Yes, certainly," the lady replied. "Take the lift to the first floor. You'll find the Eagle Conference room is the third room along."

Clint followed the lady's instructions, checked his letter of appointment against the room, and knocked on the door. He heard no reply, so went in. To his surprise, he saw Professor Marshall by the table.

"Hi Frank, this is the Eagle Conference room, isn't it?" Clint asked, as he read his letter again to double-check that he was in the correct place.

"Yes it is Clint," said Professor Marshall. "What brings you here?"

"I've got an appointment with Mr Luddolmans at 2.30," Clint informed him.

"That's odd, so have I," said Professor Marshall. "I wonder what he wants us for?"

"I don't know," replied Clint. "This letter I was given is rather vague. Did you get a letter of invitation too?"

"Yes, I did, but my letter is pretty much vague, as well," said Professor Marshall. "I don't suppose Corny's in on this too, do you?"

"Nahhh, I doubt it," said Clint. "I saw him coming out of the medical room at NASA HQ. He told me he was booked on the 3.15 flight to Buffalo."

Just then, Fred Luddolmans came into the room.

"Hello guys, I hope you haven't been waiting here too long," he said.

"No, we haven't been here long," Professor Marshall replied.

"Good, good," muttered Fred. "Now, I'll bet you've both been wondering what you're doing here."

Clint and Professor Marshall looked at each other for a second.

"Well, I've got an offer for both of you that you won't want to turn down," Fred said to them. "The offers are pretty much the same, so I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone, as they say in England."

"You don't mind me asking, sir, but what do the offers consist of?" asked Clint.

"I was just about to come to that," said Fred. "By the way, you can call me Fred – I'm not really one for titles. I mean, what are they – just a few letters before your name?"

Clint and Professor Marshall looked at each other again, each of them

thinking this all seemed a little odd. Fred then handed them each a large envelope.

"I'm going to ask you both to have a little read of the contents in your envelope," Fred said to them. "Let me know how you feel about the offer. If you need any advice or assistance, just ask."

While Clint and Professor Marshall carefully read the documents from the envelope, a familiar 'Thriller' jingle could be heard. It was Fred's mobile.

"Excuse me a minute, gentlemen," said Fred. "I shouldn't be long."

As Fred went out of the room, Clint and Professor Marshall discussed the proposals, and how they may be affected. Clint seemed rather positive about the proposal, though Professor Marshall wasn't quite so sure. They decided to exchange email addresses, and to keep in contact. Fred then came back into the room.

"Hi guys, I'm back now," he said to them. "What do you think, eh?"

"Well, I had considered retiring, but hadn't made any plans," Clint told him.

"I've often found that just when I want to put my feet up, something new comes along."

"Like operation Armageddon?" queried Fred.

"Yeah, something like that," replied Clint. "I had been expecting to be called back to Afghanistan, or maybe Iraq."

"I didn't know you'd been to Afghanistan?" queried Professor Marshall.

"Oh, it wasn't for long, I'm glad to say," Clint told him. "I only went there on a few reconnaissance trips – assess where bin Laden was hanging out."

"How about you, Frank," Fred asked Professor Marshall. "What do you think? Have you got any plans or ideas in mind?"

"Er, to be honest, I hadn't thought about retirement," he told Fred. "I'm happy in my current role at NASA and don't really feel like putting my feet up just yet."

"Wouldn't you like to relax at home with your family each day? Have a little think about it," Fred queried, before turning to Clint. "You seem quite pleased."

"Oh I am pleased, not to say relieved," Clint replied. "This wasn't quite what I had expected."

"Tell me Clint, how old are you now, if you don't mind me asking," Fred queried.

"Fifty-one," Clint informed him. "I'll be fifty-two in January. Is there a date this is to take effect from?"

"No specific date has been outlined yet, but probably Monday after next,"

Fred told Clint. "That date will be up to you and the academy Commander. Do you have any ideas in mind, as to what you'd like to do, or where to go?"

"No, not really," said Clint. "See more of my family and friends, I guess. Beyond that, I'm really not sure. I'll have to discuss this with Mary and our family."

"Well I'm glad you're pleased," Fred said to him. "Do you have a flight booked?"

"No, not yet," said Clint. "That shouldn't be a problem, though. It's only about an hour to Denver, or I may be able to get someone from the academy to come and pick me up."

Fred then stood up and shook hands with Clint.

"Give my best wishes to your wife and family," Fred said to Clint. "I'll have to come to visit you sometime, wherever it may be."

"You'll always be welcome to come along," Clint replied, as Professor Marshall also stood up to shake his hand. "You're welcome too, Frank. It looks like you'll have plenty of time to pay us a visit."

Fred then turned to Professor Marshall, as Clint waved farewell.

"How about you, Frank?" he asked. "Have you thought any more about the offer? You'll notice the terms are very good, a more-than-adequate pension and an excellent handshake. Much better than what you'd normally be entitled to at sixty."

"Oh yes, I don't dispute that," the Professor replied. "It's come as a big surprise to me, that's all. I'd like a little more time to think about it, to discuss things."

"What is there to discuss Frank?" Fred queried with him. "You're not getting any younger. You don't mind me asking, how old are you, by the way?"

"I only turned fifty-two last month," Professor Marshall told Fred. "It's not like I've had a very arduous job all my life."

"No, no, I accept that, but you don't need to have an arduous job to retire," Fred insisted. "Positions like yours, Frank, involve a lot of thinking and concentration. You can't afford to make mistakes, you've got to be at the top of your game all the time."

"Are you saying I'm not?" Professor Marshall asked Fred with a hint of anger.

"No, no, of course not," said Fred. "I'm just trying to explain that your kind of role has its pressures, too. Frankly, if you pardon the pun, I'm just surprised that you're not excited about the opportunity we've put forward

for you.”

“We?” Professor Marshall asked. “Who's 'we'? Someone else is behind this, aren't they?”

“No, no, I didn't mean to say that,” Fred insisted. “It was my mistake. If you want to continue studying the cosmos, you'll probably prefer to be retired. You'll have much more time to yourself to concentrate on whatever you want, and not some stupid asteroid approaching Earth.”

“Hhhmmm, that's true I suppose,” muttered Professor Marshall.

“Of course it is,” Fred told him. “If you want, you can move away from the hustle of this city and out into the wilds. You can visit Clint – I'm sure there must be some large telescopes in Colorado from which you can view the cosmos.”

Professor Marshall studied the offer a bit further.

“You are offering me a farewell of \$5 million dollars?” he asked Fred.

“That's correct, as is the offer of a regular pension of \$15,000 a month” Fred replied. “I believe that you've earned this, don't you?”

“I am coming round to the idea of retirement, but can I have a little time to think about it?” Professor Marshall asked Fred.

Fred thought carefully for a moment, and then looked into his diary.

“Okay,” he told the Professor. “I'll meet you here tomorrow afternoon, same time. But Frank, don't tell anyone.”

“How about my wife, Jeanette?” he queried. “After all, she'll be involved in any future changes in my life.”

“You can speak to Jeanette, by all means,” Fred told him. “Just don't mention it to any of your team.”

Professor Marshall went straight to his house after leaving the hotel, and thought carefully what to say to his wife.

“Is that you Frank?” Jeanette called from the kitchen, as he opened the front door.

“Hi, honey,” he said to her. “I've just had a meeting, that's why I'm a little earlier than usual.”

“It wasn't about that asteroid again, was it?” she queried.

“No, not really,” he replied.

“I'm making myself a coffee,” she called to him. “Would you like one?”

“Yes please,” said Frank. “We can drink them together, if you're not too busy. There's something important I'd like to discuss with you.”

Frank went their bedroom to get changed and put his briefcase away. He took the envelope back downstairs, and found Jeanette on the sofa with a

cup in her hand, watching TV, with another cup on the coffee table. He went to sit beside her, and gave her a kiss.

"What brought that on?" she asked him. "You're not in one of your randy moods?"

"No, well, not yet anyway," he replied. "Besides, I thought you'd forgotten about my randy moods."

"Ooh, you know me better than that," Jeanette said to him, with a cheeky grin on her face. "I never forget any randy moments."

"That meeting I went to," he said as he handed her the envelope. "I was given this, and I'd like you to have a read of what's inside. Let me know what you think."

Jeanette looked at him curiously. When she opened the envelope, she noticed the word 'Retirement', and stared at her husband again.

"Is this for you?" she asked him.

Frank just smiled back, and suggested to read the details inside, as he changed the channel on the TV. Jeanette looked first of all at any figures or values inside, to get an idea of the terms offered to Frank.

"This says they're offering you a golden handshake of five million dollars," she queried. "Is that right?"

"Yepp," said Frank. "I was a little concerned about the pension, though."

"What? \$15,000 a month?" Jeanette queried. "With that handshake you've been offered, we won't have to worry about a mortgage. Plus I still have a pension of my own. You have other pensions too, don't you?"

"Yes, but I won't be entitled to them for another eight years," Frank told her.

"We don't have to stay here, though, do we," she said to him. "We could downsize, after all, the kids have grown up, why should we need a five bedroomed suburban house?"

"Hhmmmm, that's true," Frank muttered. "Would you consider moving out into the wilds? I didn't think that was your style."

"Oh no no no," Jeanette replied. "If we've got half a million dollars to play around with, we could move to Florida or Hawaii. Somewhere we could laze around on a hot sunny beach."

"I wouldn't fancy Miami, and Hawaii's too far away," Frank said to her.

"Besides, I don't want to be stuck in the middle of the Pacific."

"How about California?" Jeanette suggested.

"Oh, I don't know about that - California's probably too expensive, anyway," Frank commented.

"California isn't just LA, in case you'd forgotten," Jeanette replied.

"Besides, we shouldn't need to worry about expenses."

Frank thought to himself for a moment.

"On the other hand, Pasadena would be okay," he considered. "It's relatively near to Mount Wilson observatory, and Big Bear's not too far away, either."

"Frank, Frank, honey, do you want to go on stargazing?" Jeanette asked softly, as she put her left arm over his right shoulder. "You can relax....take it easy....put your feet up. It's time to enjoy yourself, honey."

Frank went quiet. Jeanette seized the moment, and put her other arm around him, before kissing him. Frank stared at her, but she just put her finger to her lip and quietly uttered "shhhh!". While Frank's mouth was open, Jeanette smothered him again, and gave him a full French kiss. Frank had forgotten everything else, and let himself go.

"Shall we go upstairs?" he then asked her after a few minutes of petting.

"Nahhhh, let's do it here," Jeanette replied. "No-one can see us anyway."

While they were snogging, she quickly undid the top button on her jeans. Frank then helped pulled them down. By now he was oblivious to anything else, and was soon entering. Frank hadn't felt as good for a while as he breathed faster and faster, deeper and deeper.

"Come on....Frank," she panted. "It's time.... to celebrate. Oaaarghhhhhhh, come on....Frank, give it....to me. "

"Celebrate what....honeysuckle?" he asked curiously.

"Your retirement, " Jeannete panted, heavier still.

"I haven't....agreed to....the offer...yet," Frank replied.

"I know you....honey,....you're not.....going tooooohhh....turn that offer....down," she said to him, still panting away. "Now come on....Frank....let's carry on....celebrating. Oaaarghhhhhhh!"

The next day, Frank Marshall went back to NASA HQ, as usual. No-one was aware of the offer, and didn't query his appointment at the Marriott hotel that afternoon. At 2.30 promptly, he knocked on the door of the Eagle conference room. He could see Fred Luddolmans inside, gesturing to him to enter.

"Hi Frank, come on in," Fred said to him. "How are you today?"

"Oh I'm fine, thanks," Frank replied. "A little more relaxed than yesterday."

"I take it that you've come to a decision regarding the offer," Fred asked.

"Yes thank you," Frank replied. "I've read the documentation, and have decided to accept the offer of retirement, if the offer still stands?"

"Good, good, I knew you'd like the offer. The offer still stands, by the

way," Fred muttered, before passing papers to Frank for his signature.

"There's just a few things I wanted to clarify first of all, if you don't mind," Frank then queried.

"How can I be of help?" Fred replied.

"Well, could you confirm what appendix 12 refers to," asked Frank as he showed the paragraph to Fred. "It says 'Final release of the values are subject to the full agreement of all parties'."

"Oh you shouldn't have to worry about that," Fred assured him. "I'll make sure of that. You can sign the forms for now."

"If the documents are to be re-worded, shouldn't I wait until the new documents are produced?" Frank queried.

"The appendix needn't be amended," Fred told him. "I'm here to ensure all parties agree to the terms."

"Who precisely is the other party involved?" Frank asked. "Is it NASA? The documents are not printed on NASA-headed paper."

"That's because NASA are a third party in this," Fred explained, as Frank looked at him unconvinced. "Don't worry, Frank, there's nothing to worry about, I'll take care of that. You just need to sign the forms and everything on offer will be yours'."

Frank thought about all he would receive for a moment, and then signed the forms. As he was signing, Fred was very relieved.

"It just remains for me to confirm a few final details for your benefit," Fred told Frank. "Firstly, your retirement should take effect in about four weeks from now. That should give us sufficient time to find your successor."

"Will I be required to sit-in on the panel?" Frank asked.

"Er, probably not at this stage," Fred replied. "You'll probably need a bit of time to sort out your tasks-in-hand, particularly with that asteroid business."

"Oh, there shouldn't be any further plans put into place regarding the asteroid," Frank told Fred. "We've already put into place a program for monitoring the asteroid, or should that be a new moon?"

"That leads me to the second point," said Fred. "Now that the asteroid is no longer a danger, you can cancel any future monitoring of it."

"But surely we still need to monitor the asteroid," said a very surprised Frank. "Now that it's relatively close-at-hand we have an excellent opportunity to study the asteroid."

"I know what you mean, Frank, but it's considered that should be something for the future," Fred emphasised.

"But that asteroid must be studied," said Frank. "We need to find out more

about that asteroid. It was travelling at astronomical speeds. We need to find out what made it do so, why it reduced in speed the closer it came to Earth. That was no ordinary asteroid.”

“I know, Frank, I know, but it's considered that there are more important issues in the world today,” Fred told him. “NASA became a very important cog in the US wheel for nine months, but now NASA have done their job, there are other matters of greater significance out there, I'm afraid.”

“This is why you're retiring me, isn't it?” Frank said angrily. “The President wanted to get rid of me, didn't he? He probably thought 'who's that dumb ass who couldn't monitor the asteroid properly'. Well you can tell him from me that that asteroid has done everything we've stated, which is why it needs to be studied in depth.”

“I know, Frank, I know,” Fred said again. “I've kept the President informed about the asteroid. I've told him what an excellent job you and your colleagues have done, in monitoring the asteroid, designing Big Bessie, and successfully deflecting The asteroid away from Earth.”

“And I don't suppose he took a lot of notice,” Frank commented.

“On the contrary,” said Fred. “The President has even spoken to Moscow about this, to fully clarify the asteroid's movements. That's precisely why it has been agreed to pass the matter elsewhere.”

“Where to?” Frank asked. “Military Intelligence?”

Fred said nothing.

“This isn't something you can pass to the Military to sort out,” Frank emphasised. “You need experts to monitor the asteroid, people who know what to look for and when to look for it.”

“Trust me Frank, this will be examined by experts,” Fred assured him.

“What experts?” asked Frank. “The whole matter is being censored, isn't it? Just like Roswell.”

“I'm sorry Frank, but I can't say any more,” Fred said to him.

“Well what do I say to Steve and Rob, monitoring the asteroid, eh?” asked Frank. “What if I tell my team to continue monitoring the asteroid?”

“Well if that were to happen appendix 12 of your retirement plan may come into play,” Fred told him.

Frank thought carefully to himself for a minute, before asking, “What if I told the papers about this whole matter?”

“Again, appendix 12 of your retirement plan may come into play,” Fred told him. “Think about it.”

The room went quiet for a few minutes, as Frank Marshall thought to himself about whether to renege on accepting the offer of retirement.

"Look Frank, is it really worth all this hassle?" Fred said to him. "This has been decided by the President, a President who has less than a year of his term to run. In 8 months we'll have a new President, who may decide to re-open the matter to NASA, and to the American public."

"It doesn't feel nice that you've got me over a barrel, but I suppose you're right," Frank sighed.

"Of course I'm right," Fred said to him. "It's time you thought about yourself, Frank. Look after number one, you."

Frank then shook Fred's hand, before saying farewell and leaving the room.

Relatively Speaking

Professor Frank Marshall went to NASA HQ the next day as usual. Nobody had a clue about his future. Until just before noon, when he went to see Dr Steve de Pierri in his office.

"Hi Steve, how's things with you today?" he asked.

"Hi there Frank," Steve replied. "Where have you been these last few days? We were beginning to wonder whether you'd gone to the ESA, to discuss this asteroid."

"Oh no, nothing like that I'm afraid, though I wouldn't mind a trip to Rome or Paris," Frank told him. "In actual fact, I've had some important matters to examine, plus a couple of appointments to attend."

"Was it all related?" Steve queried, to which Frank just nodded his head.

"Can I ask what this was about?"

Frank wasn't very good at keeping secrets, and just kept grinning.

"It wouldn't have anything to do with me?" Steve asked curiously.

"Oh what the hell," Frank said to himself. "You're going to find out soon enough, so I don't suppose it will harm if I told you now. I'll be retiring next month."

"You kept that quiet!" said a very surprised Steve. "How long have you been planning this? I didn't think you intended to retire."

"Well, to be honest Steve, I didn't intend to retire, not at this time, anyway," Frank told him. "I was offered a golden handshake and felt it was too good to turn down."

"Was that as a reward for all that time and hard work you've put in, in recent months?" Steve asked, a little sarcastically.

"You could say that," Frank replied, before he got the gist of what Steve meant. "I know you're really responsible for monitoring that asteroid, and

compiling all the related data, but I've had to co-ordinate everything, inform the Secretary for Defence and the President. I've even travelled to Moscow."

"True, true," Steve mumbled. "I can't say I'd have wanted to fly to Moscow, and arrive there at midnight."

Just then there was a knock on the door. It was Robert Langman. Frank went to the door to let Robert in.

"I'm not disturbing anything, am I?" Robert asked. "Is everything alright?"

"Why it's perfect," Frank replied.

"Oh," mumbled Robert. "What's the good news?"

"I've been offered a golden handshake," Frank explained. "I'm due to retire next month. Anyway, I'm glad you're here, Rob, because there are a few things I wanted to ask each of you."

"How can we help, Frank?" Steve asked.

"Well, that asteroid you've been monitoring," he said to Steve and Robert.

"How are things going? Have you noticed anything odd about it recently?"

"No, not really," replied Steve. "I'm still monitoring it each day, but there are no signs of movement, no signs of it veering off it's current orbit. To be honest, it's just like the Moon – there's nothing there."

"Well, I think this might be a good time to call this project a day," said Frank, hoping there would be no objections from Steve and Robert.

"Oh it's no trouble monitoring the asteroid, or should we refer to it as Moon2?" Steve replied. "I've not quite finished mapping it just yet. It shouldn't take long to complete."

"How long?" Frank asked.

"A few more days, probably," Steve replied. "The thing is, it isn't always where you would like it to be in the sky. It orbits faster than the Moon, so it varies precisely where it is each day."

Frank thought to himself for a moment or two. "Will it be ready by Friday?" he asked

"Yeah, no problem," replied Steve. "You don't mind me asking, Frank, but why do you want to terminate this little project just now?"

"I believe there are some other major projects we'd like you to concentrate on," Frank told him, uncertain as what these 'new projects' may be.

"That's right," said an excited Robert, as Frank looked on rather bemused.

"That comet heading for Mars which I've been monitoring, it's due to collide in the next few weeks."

"Thanks for pointing that out, Rob," a relieved Frank said to him. "Yes, I'd like you to concentrate your time working with Robert. The final outcome may help us understand how the Earth was formed."

"Do you think Mars has enough of an atmosphere to contain any comet explosion?" Steve queried. "For that matter, do you think Mars has enough gravity within it to maintain an atmosphere?"

"I don't really know," Frank told him. "That's what I want you and Rob to determine, so we may know what to expect. Anyway, I'll leave you two to discuss things amongst yourselves. Good day to you both - I'll be in my office if you need me."

As Frank left the room, Robert and Steve looked at each other.

"That's a surprise, Frank retiring," Rob said to Steve after Frank had left.

"When you've been here as long as I have, you learn never to be surprised by the unexpected," Steve commented to Robert.

"Oh, how long have you been here?" Robert asked.

"Fifteen years," Steve told him.

"That's quite a while," Rob muttered. "Frank must have been here a long time?"

"About sixteen years, not much more than me, actually," said Steve. "To tell you the truth, he came here as an Oil Surveyor. Someone on a surveying project had an accident, and Frank got his job."

"Well it looks like he won't be surveying Mars, after the comet has smashed into it," Robert pointed out. "Come to my room and I'll fill you in on all the details I've got on the comet."

Back on the asteroid, alias Moon2, also known as the Interstellar Pilgrim, Professor Wagstaff was also closely watching the comet and awaiting its Martian impact with bated breath. He was discussing all the possibilities and probabilities with Professor Schmidt, and what surprises lay ahead.

"It seems like everything's running smoothly for you," Professor Schmidt said to his scientific colleague. "Is there any chance that you may be able to help me on my project?"

"Quite possibly," Professor Wagstaff replied. "Are there any problems?"

"No, not really," Professor Schmidt said to him. "It's just that this whole project of monitoring Earth is much bigger than anyone imagined."

"Oh, why's that?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"There are so many different life forms, too many to count," Professor Schmidt replied. "There are so many humans, too. In fact, some countries have more than one billion humans."

"By jove, that's astronomical!" said an astounded Professor Wagstaff. "How many are there altogether on the planet, I wonder?"

"Too many to count," replied Professor Schmidt. "There are so many different people and so many countries in which they live in. There are several different beliefs, too."

"Beliefs?" asked Professor Wagstaff. "What sort of beliefs?"

"On different parts of the planet, people believe in various religious, super-human, spiritual leaders," Professor Schmidt informed him. "If you ask me, these are more mythical than realistic, but too many people believe in them. People have fought wars because of their beliefs. In fact, there are wars going on right now due to some of these beliefs. Like those suicide bombers we saw pictures of, you remember?"

"It makes you wonder whether it's worth trying to settle on Earth," Professor Wagstaff commented. "We'll see what happens to ZR4, er, I mean Mars, when that comet smashes into it."

"We won't be able to settle there just yet," Professor Schmidt pointed out.

"No, not just yet, but when the second comet impacts, we may have a better chance," said Professor Wagstaff. "If the atmosphere is strong enough to contain any oxygen or water from the first comet, the second comet impact will increase the chances of life. Then all we'd need is to give Mars would be some methane and carbon-dioxide to keep the planet heated. Who knows what may happen after, especially with a helping hand."

"I think we should call a Special Scientific meeting," said Professor Schmidt.

"And what might that be?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"A meeting like we had recently, with the commander and Major Retono," explained Professor Schmidt. "I think they should be informed of current events. They're the real decision-makers here. Whatever we suggest to do will require their authority."

Fortunately, both Commander Ondichi and Major Retono weren't busy at the time, and soon came to Professor Wagstaff's office. Professor Schmidt emphasised his concerns, and that he felt the Interstellar Pilgrim and its people may be best seeking habitation elsewhere. Professor Wagstaff then outlined the possibilities of Mars and both the forthcoming comet impact plus a further impact in the future. Then, however, Professor Schmidt raised another concern.

"Do any of you know the timescales system on Earth at all?" he asked the others.

"I know they use the terms minutes, hours, days and years," replied Commander Ondichi. "I'm not fully conversant in the timescales, however."

"Well let me explain," said Professor Schmidt. "A second is one very brief moment, sixty seconds make up a minute, and sixty minutes make up one hour. Each Earth day is twenty-four hours. Are you with me so far?"

The Commander and Professor Wagstaff quietly acknowledged Professor Schmidt, before Major Retono asked what the significance of one day was.

"You may have noticed that the Earth rotates," Professor Schmidt explained. "Twenty-four hours is the length of time it takes the Earth to complete one full rotation, which is one day. Additionally, it then takes the Earth three-hundred-and-sixty-five days, or one year, to orbit Zorontin, or as humans refer to it, the sun."

"Is this a problem?" Commander Ondichi asked. "Otherwise I'd be grateful if can you elaborate on what you're eluding to?"

"Time isn't a problem in itself," Professor Schmidt emphasised. "I should state, however, that the life expectancy on Earth is only about eighty years."

The others all looked a little confused.

"How long are we expected to live on board here?" Major Retono asked.

"I've calculated life expectancy on the Interstellar Pilgrim to be over five thousand years," explained Professor Schmidt.

"That can't be right, can it?" Professor Wagstaff queried. "Don't forget we spend much of our time in hibernation."

"True, true," replied Professor Schmidt. "But even if we spend three-quarters of our life in hibernation, it still means that we live to over one thousand Earth years. Do any of you want to reduce your lifespan?"

"Perhaps you miscalculated somewhere along the way," suggested the Commander. "How did you work that out?"

"Well, on Earth they refer to the monsters which our forefathers encountered as dinosaurs," Professor Schmidt explained. "You may be aware that our forefathers left Earth when an asteroid was due to collide with it. I've read information on some massive network called the World Wide Web, which indicates that this occurred sixty-five million Earth years ago."

"So how did you make your calculations from there?" asked Major Retono.

"Do any of you know how many generations of people have lived on the Interstellar Pilgrim?" Professor Schmidt asked the others.

"I would say about ten thousand," said Professor Wagstaff.

"I calculated it to be nearer twelve thousand," Professor Schmidt replied.

"These are only rough calculations, but can you see how I've done this? I accept that we do spend about 75% of our time travelling in hibernation, but this still leaves an average age on the Interstellar Pilgrim of over 1.3 thousand years. Do any of you know if I've missed anything out?"

As Major Retono and Professor Wagstaff tried to think of any additional calculations, Commander Ondichi was in deep thought.

"Hhmm, I wonder," he muttered.

"Wonder what?" Professor Schmidt asked curiously. "Have I overlooked something?"

"I was looking on the World Wide Web about humans and their views of the cosmos just the other day," said the commander. "I came across something referred to as the theory of relativity, by some professor known as Eensteen."

"I think you'll find the name is pronounced as Einstein," Professor Schmidt informed him.

"How do you know?" Commander Ondichi queried. "Have you come across him before?"

"Yes," replied Professor Schmidt. "I've heard the name mentioned and read some of his work."

"Well, this theory of relativity contained a chapter referred to as the Twin's Paradox," Commander Ondichi added. "If I understood this correctly, it suggests that if one of two twin brothers went on a long space journey, on a rocket travelling at almost the speed of light, when the traveller returned, he would be younger than his twin who stayed put. Search for it on the World Wide Web."

Professor Schmidt searched under the title 'Twins Paradox', and sure enough, came across a couple of paragraphs confirming what the Commander had said, reading the following out to his colleagues:

The Twin Paradox: Introduction

Example: Story of twins, Homer and Stella. Homer sits at home on Earth., while Stella travels in a spaceship at nearly the speed of light to a star 7 light-years away. On reaching her destination, Stella turns around , thrusters blazing, and returns.

When our heroes meet again, what do they find? Did time slow down for Stella, making her years younger than her home-bound brother? Or can Stella declare that the Earth did the traveling, so Homer is the younger?

Special Relativity (SR) suggests the first answer is correct: Stella ages

less than Homer between the departure and the reunion. SR does not declare that all frames of reference are equivalent, only so-called inertial frames. Stella's frame is not inertial while she is accelerating. And this is observationally detectable: Stella had to fire her thrusters midway through her trip; Homer did nothing of the sort. The Ming vase she had borrowed from Homer fell over and cracked. She struggled to maintain her balance, like the crew of Star Trek. In short, she felt the acceleration, while Homer felt nothing.

We've said why Stella can't simply adopt Homer's viewpoint, but we haven't said how things look from her perspective. It seems strange that Homer could age several years just because Stella engages her thrusters. The Time Gap and Distance Dependence Objections put a sharper edge on this uneasy feeling.

What about General Relativity (GR)? Doesn't that say that Stella can still claim to be motionless the whole time, but that a humongous gravitational field just happened to sweep through the universe when she hit her "thrusters on" button? (For that matter, Homer experiences the Earth's gravity; is his frame truly inertial?) Some people claim that the twin paradox can be resolved only by invoking GR. We disagree, but the "GR Explanation" of the twin paradox does shed some light. The GR viewpoint is nearly mandatory for understanding some of the twin paradox variations. Let's lay out a "standard version" of the paradox in detail, and settle on some terminology. We'll get rid of Stella's acceleration at the start and end of the trip. Stella flashes past Homer in her spaceship both times, coasting along. Here's the itinerary according to Homer:

Start Event - Stella flashes past. Clocks are synchronized to 0.

Outbound Leg - Stella coasts along at (say) nearly 99 percent of light-speed. At 99 percent, the time dilation factor is a bit over 7, so let's say the speed is just a shade under 99 percent and the time dilation factor is 7. This part of the trip takes 7 years, according to Homer.

Turnaround - Stella fires her thrusters for, say, 1 day, until she is coasting back towards Earth at nearly 99 percent light-speed. Some variations on the paradox call for an instantaneous Turnaround; we'll call that the Turnaround Event.

Inbound Leg - Stella coasts back for 7 years at 99 percent light-speed.

Return Event - Stella flashes past Homer in the other direction, and they compare clocks, or any other sign of elapsed time.

According to Homer, 14 years and a day have elapsed between the Start and Return Events; Stella's clock however reads just a shade over 2 years.

They each read the screen a few times to try to fully understand the information.

"So let's get this into perspective," said Major Retono. "When travelling at light speed time becomes diluted."

"Dilated," Professor Schmidt corrected him. "Light speed would appear to give a time dilation factor of seven."

"So presumably, time dilation decreases the slower the speed of travel," suggested Professor Wagstaff. "On that basis, the speed at which we are currently travelling at, or indeed, at which ZR3, sorry, the Earth is travelling at become relatively stable."

"I'd like to take a closer look at this theory," commented Professor Schmidt. "At first glance it doesn't seem to fully account for time difference. There seem to be quite a lot of calculations, so I think this needs to be checked out."

"I can think of other factors which haven't yet been taken into account which reduce the average lifespan on Earth," added Major Retono.

"Such as?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"Several spring to mind," replied the Major. "Pollution, disease, crime, violence and warfare seem very common on Earth. I'm sure there are other factors too."

"I take your point, Major, but I'm still not fully satisfied with the theory," said Professor Schmidt. "I'll check this over and let you all know at our next meeting. Perhaps we may know a bit more about this by then."

"How is your Earth Monitoring project coming along?" Commander Ondichi asked Professor Schmidt.

"Rather slowly, I'm afraid," replied the Professor. "There are a very large number of people on Earth, speaking many different languages. Each time I've recorded and saved a new language someone in my team has discovered a new one. On top of that there are as many regional variations, referred to as dialects."

"How many languages have you traced so far?" Major Retono asked.

"Over one hundred, and still counting," said Professor Schmidt. "However,

there are about six or seven major languages spoken, by about half of the Earth's population. These include our own language, which is referred to as English."

"Concentrate on the major languages only," the Commander ordered. "You can forget the dialects for now."

"Presumably you've identified which lands these languages cover?" Major Retono queried, to which Professor Schmidt acknowledged. "What about the Mapping process - how is that coming along?"

"I haven't yet started that, I'm afraid," said Professor Schmidt. "I've discussed this with Professor Wagstaff, who has kindly agreed to help."

"Yes, we're going to assess how best my team can help and how to go about it," Professor Wagstaff confirmed. "This shouldn't affect my current project too much, though I will keep a check on the ZR4, er sorry, Mars comet."

"The comet sent to Mars is due to collide with the planet sometime soon, I believe," queried Commander Ondichi.

"That is correct," replied Professor Wagstaff. "However, I don't expect there will be much to examine to start with, as either the impact will leave a thick smoggy atmosphere with little visibility, or else the gasses from the impacting comet will wander back into the cosmos, depending on the strength of the Martian gravity."

Just then, a call came through to the Commander from Major Kong, upon which the four of them agreed to abandon the current discussion, and meet again when the Martian comet had impacted.

As the comet impact on Mars drew nearer, Professor Schmidt's team had almost completed recording the main Earth languages. The professor himself, meanwhile, was looking into the Theory of Relativity and precisely how the Twin's Paradox is calculated. As this wasn't yet fully understood, it was agreed that everyone on the Interstellar Pilgrim would be made aware only that there was an abnormal difference between life expectancy on Earth and on the Interstellar Pilgrim. This deflated most of the interest in eventually settling on Earth. Instead, the main focus was now on Mars, and the forthcoming event.

Then, one evening, as the sun went behind Earth's horizon, the light from Mars increased in a flash. The comet had exploded on the Martian surface. One of Professor Wagstaff's team leaders, Sanchez, went into his office.

"Professor, Professor, the comet has smashed into Mars," he told him.

"Splendid!" Professor Wagstaff replied. "Did you get to see much of the impact?"

"Our telescope was focused directly at the point of impact," Sanchez informed Professor Wagstaff. "We had been monitoring the comet closely for some time now."

"At what angle to did the comet approach Mars?" the Professor asked.

"About 45 degrees, more or less," replied Sanchez. "The remnants of the comet were spread over a wider area than we first anticipated."

"Splendid!" Professor Wagstaff said again. "Have you been able to tell what happened to the remnants of the comet?"

"Not as yet, Professor, we're waiting for the remnants of the comet to settle before we can make precise calculations," Sanchez replied.

"However, we do know what the comet contained, and have made some assumptions."

"I've been very busy just recently, so you wouldn't mind refreshing my memory of what they might be?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"We believe that most of the ice from the comet will simply melt into water," said Sanchez. "Mars is probably too cold to heat the ice to the extent where it rises as water vapour. We're pretty sure that the comet also contained Carbon Dioxide, Methane, Ethane, Ammonia and some Amino acids."

"Can you keep me informed on events," Professor Wagstaff requested.

"Oh, and could you send pictures of the impact to my screen, there's a good chap."

Professor Wagstaff then contacted Professor Schmidt, and invited him to his office, to tell him of the events.

"How is the mapping of Earth coming along?" Professor Schmidt asked.

"Quite well, actually," Professor Wagstaff replied. "However, I've had to direct some resources to the Martian comet project."

"Let me know where you require assistance, as my team has now completed the language monitoring," Professor Schmidt suggested.

"Thanks ever so much, that would be super," said Professor Wagstaff.

"Have you found out much about that phenomenon we were discussing recently?"

"The Twin's Paradox, you mean?" queried Professor Schmidt. "I've searched on the World Wide Web for the Theory of Relativity, and it seems the more I read about it, the more curious this phenomenon becomes."

"Oh, why's that?" asked Professor Wagstaff. "Isn't there much about this?"

"Quite the opposite, in fact," replied Professor Schmidt. "I've found the original theory, but there seems to be a lot more recent information which doesn't exactly agree. In fact, I've come across some information which contradicts the theory all together."

"Have you managed to use any of the formulae to come to any conclusion?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"I've tried all the formulae, which all appear to be correct," said Professor Schmidt. "I personally believe there is something missing which links them all, but I can't put my finger on it."

"I've been thinking about this myself recently, in Earth terms of course," said Professor Wagstaff. "Think of a star 5 light years away, and a ship travelling towards it at light speed. If the ship left Earth in, say 2000, after one year at light speed it would have travelled one light year, of course."

"Yes, yes, carry on," said an intrigued Professor Schmidt.

"Well, in 2001 the light from the ship will be one year old, and hence from 2000, as though from Earth, the ship and it's crew hadn't aged at all," Professor Wagstaff explained. "By the same theory, when the ship reached the star after 5 years, in 2005, the light seen from Earth will be 5 years old, and from 2000, again."

"So the ship will be the same age as when it left Earth?" queried Professor Schmidt.

"And the crew will not have aged at all," said Professor Wagstaff.

"I've considered this too, but surely, if the ship returned to Earth, travelling at the speed of light, then after one year, 2007, it would be four light years away, and the light seen from Earth would relate to 2002," commented Professor Schmidt.

"Yes, logically speaking," acknowledged Professor Wagstaff.

"That would suggest that on approaching Earth, the ship will have aged two years in the space of one," Professor Schmidt queried. "On that basis, by the time the ship reached Earth in 2010, the age of the ship and it's crew will relate to the same year and time, 2010."

"Yes, but you haven't taken account of the fact that age is constant when travelling at light speed," argued Professor Wagstaff.

Professor Schmidt thought to himself for a moment.

"I don't dispute that the ship will have returned to Earth by 2010, but because it was travelling at light speed, the crew will remain as young as they were when they left Earth," said Professor Wagstaff. "This is all

relatively speaking, i.e. relativity.”

“I think I see where you're coming from,” Professor Schmidt said to his colleague. “Everything is relative to Earth-time.”

“Precisely,” said Professor Wagstaff. “When something, or someone, is travelling at light speed they will not age in Earth-time. The Interstellar Pilgrim has been travelling at almost light speed for so long that, allowing for reduction of speed from time to time, people on board will have aged very slowly in Earth terms.”

“Have you clarified this at all, or calculated the average life on the 'Pilgrim?” asked Professor Schmidt.

“I can make some educated speculations, but I won't really know the true amount of distance the 'Pilgrim has travelled over the millenia,” said Professor Wagstaff. “Would you know?”

“Well let's calculate light speed in Earth-terms,” said Professor Schmidt, as he played with some figures on his spreadsheet. “I make it 669.6 million miles per hour.”

Professor Wagstaff looked at the engine records of the Interstellar Pilgrim, to see if he could find the average speed of the ship. He found the average speed to be 600 million miles per hour.

“That would mean that our average speed was 88% of light speed,” Professor Schmidt said to him. “But in life terms, if we live 88% of constant life, what is the constant?”

“I don't really know,” muttered Professor Wagstaff. “Surely everyone's life must come to an end sometime? Surely there must be a figure to go by?”

“Yes, but what is it?” asked Professor Schmidt.

“I don't think we should ponder too much about this for the moment,” suggested Professor Wagstaff. “We have plenty more important projects to work on. Perhaps we should call one of those special scientific meetings.”

“What for?” queried Professor Schmidt. “I don't think the Commander or Major Retono would be too interested in this, do you?”

“No, but as I said, we have other things to get on with,” Professor Wagstaff told his colleague. “If we can convince them that this is the missing link we've been looking for, perhaps we can start to assess our next move.”

“What move?” asked Professor Schmidt. “Do you want to go to Earth, after all that we've found out?”

“Yes I would,” replied Professor Wagstaff. “I don't see myself living for eternity. Give me a villa on Lanzarote, where the sun shines and the sea is

blue, I think I'd be happy."

"Lanzarote? Which star system is that in?" asked Professor Schmidt.

"It's an island on Earth," said Professor Wagstaff. "To some people, it may seem prudent to live elsewhere, but this is all relative, hence the Theory of Relativity. In interstellar time, our lives are as long as those who left Earth all those millions of years ago. "

"I take your point Professor, but I want to take a closer look at this is theory," Professor Schmidt told him.

"Oh do so by all means," said Professor Wagstaff. "Let me know if you come up with anything different."

Professor Schmidt, ever the man for detail and calculations, thought the theory over carefully. Using averages for times and distances, he put some statistics together, which roughly seemed to tally with Professor Wagstaff's suggestion.

Rather than looking deeper into the theory, he notified Commander Ondichi of what had been discussed. The Commander noted the new theory, which would be put to Council at the next meeting. In the meantime, he decided to call a special scientific meeting, to prepare for the final journey to Earth.

Ingleborough

It was during this period that the Martian comet impact results began to show. With a small atmosphere, the dust settled relatively quickly. It was noticed that the amount of water remaining on the planet was less than had been anticipated. Sanchez sent pictures illustrating this to Professor Wagstaff, to emphasise the point. They were baffled as to where half of the water had gone. The original data of the comet sent on the collision course were checked, and after this was double-checked over, they agreed that there should be more water remaining on Mars.

Professor Wagstaff discussed this with Professor Schmidt, but still they were baffled. They then searched the web for data about the surface of Mars, and discovered that this was covered with ferric oxide, known on Earth as rust. The Professors carried out tests, and found that this was caused by water dissolving on iron. They each suddenly thought perhaps this was what made Mars red, and that it had originally contained water, as indicated by what appeared to be river-beds. Perhaps further

measures would be needed to create a new planet suitable for life.

This was discussed at the next special scientific meeting, with Commander Ondichi and Major Retono.

"What do you believe to be the preliminary difference between the surfaces of Earth and Mars?" asked Major Retono.

"Well, the surface of Earth is covered in carbonic compounds," explained Professor Schmidt. "These include magnesium carbonate, which is referred to as chalk, and calcium carbonate, which I believe is referred to as limestone."

"There are other carbonic compounds as well, but we haven't determined the exact formula as yet," added Professor Wagstaff. "We know there is sulphur in some rocks, created following volcanic eruptions."

"Yes, we're examining some compositions at the moment," Professor Schmidt further added.

"Hold on, hold on a minute," Commander Ondichi said to the Professors.

"Can I get this into my head first? Earth's surface is covered with a variety of solidified carbonic compounds. If Mars were to be hit by an asteroid made of carbon, would that help in any way?"

"Probably," said Professor Wagstaff. "Some of those asteroids beyond Mars may contain the right ingredients. Do you think we should send one to collide with Mars?"

"We'd have to take a close inspection first, in order to determine the best asteroid for impact, however," added Professor Schmidt.

"Is this discussion really necessary?" commented Major Retono. "I said all along that the Martian impact comet was a bad idea. I think we should leave this item for consultation at another time. Can we discuss what we came here for initially, to consider planning future visits of Earth?"

"The Major's right," said Commander Ondichi. "Now, I understand that the language project, as agreed at our last meeting, is complete."

"Yes it is," confirmed Professor Schmidt. "The Earth mapping project is almost completed too."

Professor Schmidt contacted a member of his team, and ordered a full copy of the latest records to be sent to his computer. He would then link the meeting room screen to pick up the images.

"Professors, do either of you have anywhere in mind as to where on Earth we could land a small reconnaissance probe?" asked Commander Ondichi.

"I've noticed a lot of the information and intelligence on Earth comes from the United States," said Major Retono. "Wouldn't that be a good place to

start from?"

"Logically, it would," advised Professor Schmidt. "However, it seems as though it's governed by what some people would call a maverick, with little regard for it's people. It also appears to be at war at this moment."

"I have to agree with Professor Schmidt," commented Professor Wagstaff. "I think there are other locations on Earth more suitable to start a reconnaissance from."

"Do you have anywhere in mind?" asked Major Retono.

"There's a nice little island near the west African coast known as Lanzarote," Professor Wagstaff told the others.

Professor Schmidt stared suspiciously at his colleague.

"What's wrong with that?" Professor Wagstaff asked Professor Schmidt, who then raised an eyebrow.

"Is there something I should know, or have I missed something here?" Commander Ondichi asked.

"Oh no, no, no," replied Professor Wagstaff. "We're merely in dispute as to where we should land."

"As far as I'm concerned, I don't think we should go to Earth," Professor Schmidt commented.

"Why not?" the others each asked.

"Is there something else about Earth that we should know about?" added the Commander.

"I just don't think it's worth it," replied Professor Schmidt. "We discussed this last time, if you all remember. Life on the 'Pilgrim is a lot longer than a lifetime on Earth."

"But I thought we found the answer to that," said Commander Ondichi.

"I'm sure you all remember that theory, the Twin's Paradox, which explained the differences."

"Not fully," replied Professor Schmidt. "Even after allowing for this paradox, life on the 'Pilgrim is over 10 times greater."

"But it's all relative," said Professor Wagstaff. "Besides, I think I've worked out the remaining factor."

"And what might that be?" asked Professor Schmidt.

"I believe that we're all travelling forward in time," replied Professor Wagstaff.

"And how did you come to that conclusion?" asked Professor Schmidt.

"When we were discussing this recently you seemed to suggest the closer to light speed we got to the more likely time stood still."

"I know, I know, but think of things the other way around," said Professor

Wagstaff, before explaining what he and Professor Schmidt had debated. "The closer we get to light speed the less we age. From the opposite side of the coin, so to speak, if someone had travelled a 10 light year round trip at light speed, they would arrive back at the same place 10 years later but at the same age. So this could be interpreted as though the person had travelled forward 10 years in time."

"It all sound good, but what proof do you have?" asked Commander Ondichi.

"Well, I did a little calculation," Professor Wagstaff told him. "It goes like this: take what may be considered a good Earth age, 90. Allowing for diseases and a faster rate of ageing on Earth, multiply this by 1.25, to get what we may have considered a good life expectancy on the 'Pilgrim, 102.5 years and a bit."

"I've already tried this out," emphasised Professor Schmidt. "Can you get to the point."

"I'll be coming to that in a moment," replied Professor Wagstaff. "As we may spend up to three times this in hibernation, multiply this by 4, to get 410. Now, you recall Professor, we checked the average speed of the 'Pilgrim?"

"Yes, it was something like 600 million miles per hour, about 88% the speed of light," said Professor Schmidt, as Commander Ondichi and Major Retono looked at each other, a little bewildered.

"89.61% actually, but let's just take 89% for now," said Professor Wagstaff. "Multiply 410 by an additional 89% and you have 775. Multiply this by 12 thousand, the number of generations of people that have inhabited the 'Pilgrim, and you have 9.3 million, which multiplied by a factor of 7 gives you something over 65 million years."

"Shouldn't that factor of 7 be part of the 89% as they each relate to the speed at which a ship is travelling?" asked Professor Schmidt.

"Not really," replied Professor Wagstaff. "The time dilation factor is 7, whereas the 'future' factor, for want of a better term, is 89% the speed of light. Or to put it another way, light speed divided by actual speed, multiplied by distance equals the number of years in the future someone has travelled."

"Actually, I've looked at the generation figures again to take other factors into account, and it appears to be nearer fourteen thousand," said Professor Schmidt. "I've since calculated a different solution."

"Oh," said Professor Wagstaff. "What might that be?"

"If someone is travelling at 90% the speed of light that will suggest that

they will only age by 10% of the rate of someone on Earth.” inferred Professor Schmidt. “By that assumption, for someone to age 120 years, in Earth terms they will be 1200. Are you still with me so far?”

“Yes, yes, yes, Professor,” said Commander Ondichi. “Please carry on.”

“Well, when you consider that we would spend 75% of our lives in hibernation, this would suggest that we age 120 years in 4800 Earth years,” added Professor Schmidt. “Divide 65 million by this figure, and you arrive at just over thirteen-and-a-half thousand.”

“I thought you said it was almost fourteen thousand?” queried Professor Wagstaff.

“Taking into account the probability that the earlier crafts were not as fast as the Interstellar Pilgrim, and occasions when the crafts reduced speeds when approaching planets, should allow for the relatively small difference,” replied Professor Schmidt.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but we should discuss this theory some other time," said Commander Ondichi, before turning to Professor Schmidt. "I accept your views and why you may not be keen to visit Earth, but I'd like to forget your views for the time being. Now, where were we?"

"I think we were about to agree that the United States was not the best place on Earth to start a reconnaissance mission," Major Retono informed him.

"Yes, I like the idea of going to an island on Earth to start with," said the Commander. "What was the name of that island you mentioned, Professor Wagstaff?"

"I don't think Lanzarote would be the ideal place to start," Professor Schmidt quickly jumped in saying.

"Why ever not?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"English is not the spoken language there, for one reason," replied Professor Schmidt. "It would also appear to be a volcanic island, as are the other islands nearby. Besides, there are other, more appropriate islands to commence a reconnaissance mission."

"Where might these be?" Commander Ondichi queried.

"Australia, for one," suggested Professor Schmidt, before pointing it out on the map on screen. "They speak the same language, too."

"It's a pretty big island," commented Major Retono.

"It also appears rather barren," said Professor Wagstaff. "It's not very populous for it's size, and most people live in cities on or near the coast. I fear that if you landed in the middle of Australia, it would take you sometime to find habitation."

"How about the other three islands nearby?" asked Commander Ondichi.

"The bottom island, Tasmania, is part of Australia," explained Professor Wagstaff. "I'd need to find out a little more about the place first. As for the other two islands to the east, it might be considered a good place to start, if you wanted to talk to sheep."

Major Retono then looked north on the map and referred to Japan.

"That's probably too overcrowded," said Professor Schmidt. "It is one of the busiest places on Earth, and technologically, probably the most productive. Unfortunately, they speak their own language, which we haven't recorded. It is also volcanic."

Commander Ondichi then referred to Hawaii and it's surrounding group of islands, but being in the middle of a massive ocean, didn't seem ideal. He then pointed east on the map, first referring to Iceland, and then towards two large islands surrounded by many smaller ones.

"The smaller of the two main islands is relatively sparse," said Professor Schmidt. "This, I believe, is called Ireland."

"How about the largest island?" asked Major Retono.

"This is Britain," said Professor Schmidt. "It's very populous. They do speak our language, though. In fact, that's where English is believed to come from. It is busy, productive and influential."

"Sounds good to me," said Major Retono. "What do you think, Professor Wagstaff?"

"Well, it wouldn't be my first choice, but I suppose it has its benefits," he replied. "Can we zoom-in on Britain?"

The four of them looked carefully around the island, and also at Ireland. Whereas Ireland seemed empty, Britain seemed crowded. They did, however, notice several areas of empty land.

"Zoom-in further please, Professor Schmidt," the Commander requested.

"What are those roundish things down there?" Major Retono then asked.

"I believe these are mountains, or more likely in this case, hills," Professor Schmidt told the others.

"How about these curvy lines?" asked Commander Ondichi.

"That's probably a railway track," explained Professor Wagstaff. "They're designed for trains to run along, carrying people from one city to another."

"What about this white stuff nearby?" asked Major Retono. "It's not ice, is it?"

"Zoom in on this a little more, please," the Commander ordered.

"I think that's calcium carbonate, otherwise known around this area as limestone," said Professor Schmidt.

"I think I'm right in saying that calcium carbonate dissolves in water," Professor Schmidt commented.

"What are you eluding to, Professor?" asked the Commander.

"Well, I've noticed plenty of rainfall when I monitored this area, so I would think there should be several caves in this region," Professor Schmidt explained. "I think that would be the ideal place to base any mission."

"Hmmm, good point," muttered Major Retono. "How close to the ground can we zoom-in on this screen?"

"As close as you want to, I believe," said Professor Schmidt.

Professor Schmidt then concentrated on that particular region. As the images on-screen got closer and closer to ground-level, they each began to notice some holes in the ground.

"These holes," queried Major Retono. "Do you think they may be big enough for a small craft to land?"

"Most of them appear to be too small, but there a couple which may be suitable," advised Professor Wagstaff. "We don't know how deep they are, though."

"Surely the deeper they are the better," said Major Retono.

"Not if you want to get out of the hole," replied Professor Schmidt.

"Surely they must have regional maps on Earth," said the Commander.

"Can you see if you can trace some on the World Wide Web?"

Sure enough, Professor Schmidt traced Ordnance Survey maps, and after a short search, managed to find the appropriate map they were looking for. Though the images on screen gave a more detailed view of the area in question, they found it useful to locate the names of places and potholes they were looking at.

From here it was decided that this indeed was the best place to land a small reconnaissance craft. A couple of the potholes were large enough for the mission, and one in particular had a narrow passage leading out from it.

"Where do you think we should go from here?" asked Commander Ondichi.

Major Retono pointed to one which seemed to be suitable. He then brought this up on screen, before looking into it.

"Seems okay to me," he said. "There are a couple of caves leading out lower down the pothole. Can any of you see any problems with landing the craft in it?"

"No, no, there shouldn't be any problem landing the craft in there," Professor Wagstaff said smugly. "If we can direct a comet to smash into ZR4, sorry, Mars, from millions of miles away, this shouldn't be a problem."

"Well I'm glad you're so confident about that, as you'll be coming on the mission with me," Major Retono told him.

"Oh," mumbled Professor Wagstaff.

"How many people can we get into the craft?" Major Retono asked.

"Hasn't it been modified since the last time we used it?"

"Yes, I believe it has," said Professor Schmidt. "However, I don't think you'll get a dozen people into the craft after the council have been informed of the short length of life on Earth."

"That's as maybe, but regardless of your thoughts, Professor, there are some people on the 'Pilgrim who would like to visit Earth," said Commander Ondichi before turning to Major Retono. "Are there any particular people you want to take along with you?"

"From what I've seen of Earth and it's inhabitants, we'll need someone who's technical and someone mechanical," Major Retono stated. "Oh, and we'll probably need the replicator."

"I think the large replicator would be too big for the craft," suggested Professor Schmidt.

"Do you think the small replicator will be able to replicate those vehicles they have on Earth?" Major Retono queried.

"That should be fine for vehicles," said Professor Wagstaff. "I'm not too sure about replicating accommodation, though."

"Well if we can't find suitable accommodation, we may need to use the craft as a home," suggested Major Retono.

"I think we can get around that," said Professor Wagstaff. "It may just take a bit longer for some things, that's all."

Just then, Commander Ondichi's mobile rang. He put it on hold for a few moments.

"Do any of you have any further items to raise for this discussion?" he asked the others, to which all went quiet. "If it's agreed by all of you, this meeting has now been concluded."

The next council meeting was held the next day. Professor Schmidt came along to voice his concerns, as did Professor Wagstaff to inform the people of the Interstellar Pilgrim of his theories. Though many people were put-off the idea of visiting Earth, there still remained a fair number of people still interested in this.

Over the next few days, as the minutes from the council meeting were distributed, a few people contacted Major Retono, and by the end of the week he had prepared a list of possible 'team members' to visit Earth.

He and Professor Wagstaff interviewed those concerned, and decided on a final group of eight members to join them on their mission. This included some younger members, Ramondo, a technician, Lucas, whose father worked in the engine room and so would be a suitable mechanical assistant, and their girlfriends Madaly and Zebrina. They, together with four older men, Robinson, Gonchaves, Gaspar and Frickas, were now prepared to see what Earth had in store.

As they prepared for the mission, Lucas became a little more worried each day. His father, Verticas, re-assured him that all would be well, and that the journey would only take a few seconds. It would be as though the craft had been beamed down to Earth.

It was decided that the mission would take place late at night, when most people on Earth would be asleep. Though it took several hours for everyone on the mission to prepare for the journey, the journey itself was over in a flash. Major Retono arranged checks around the craft, before he contacted the Interstellar Pilgrim to confirm their arrival.

"The craft appears to have arrived safely," he confirmed. "There is no damage and everyone on board is okay. The only problem is that we can't see anything. It's as black as the universe. I'll be going outside in a few moments to see if I can find anything."

"It's probably dark because you've landed in a great big pot-hole," replied Professor Schmidt at the other end. "Let me know what you can see when you leave the craft."

Major Retono left the craft with Gaspar. They each carried a torch, as they looked around the craft.

"Hey, look up there," Gaspar called to Major Retono, pointing towards what appeared to be a gap in the pot-hole wall.

"That's probably one of the caves leading out from this place," the Major explained. "Do you think we can get up there from here?"

"I doubt it," Gaspar replied. "It's not too far from the craft's upper door, so we may be able to get a ramp towards it."

"We'll have to manoeuvre the craft," Major Retono suggested. "I don't think we have a ramp which bends 90%. The problem is, can we manoeuvre the craft in such a narrow space?"

"You've got to admit, Major, it was a real achievement getting this craft into such a narrow space in the first place," Gaspar laughed. "Someone must be able to manoeuvre it a little."

"We have a bit of a problem though," Major Retono told him, pointing towards a gap to his right. "If we're not careful, we may end up down that ledge. I'll go back to the craft while you stay here."

After Major Retono returned to the craft, he contacted Professor Schmidt to inform him of the situation. The Professor said it wouldn't be a problem manoeuvring the craft, but advised for Gaspar to return to the craft, in case of any accidents.

After the craft had been manoeuvred into position, Major Retono went to open the upper door. There was a 10 foot drop below, while about three feet higher was the entrance to the cave. Major Retono then went to inform the rest of the crew of this, and between them, they found a ramp long enough to reach to the cave entrance.

Just as the ramp was finally connected to the cave, Gaspar noticed some

odd drips falling. It was rain falling from above.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked Major Retono.

"I'll see if we have any sheets large enough to cover the craft," said the Major. "It may be necessary anyway, just in case anyone came this way and saw the craft."

"Do you really think anyone would want to come down here?" asked Ramondo.

"I don't know," said Major Retono. "What I do know, from the pictures I've seen of Earth, there are some mighty strange people down here."

"I thought there was supposed to be intelligent life on Earth," Gaspar commented.

"Oh there is intelligent life on Earth, make no mistake," said Major Retono.

"But from what I've seen, some people have some strange rituals and beliefs. Mind you, from what I could make out, this is probably one of the more intelligent societies. That's one of the reasons we decided to use this spot for a mission base."

Major Retono contacted Professor Wagstaff in the ship to ask if they had any cloak large enough to cover the craft. Robinson soon came out, bringing a large camouflaged cloak with him.

"How are we going to get that thing on the craft, Major?" Gaspar asked.

"Watch me," the Major said, as he pressed a button on his jacket. It was a remote control button for his shoes, which immediately 'launched' him sufficiently high enough to drape the cloak around the craft. Major Retono then pressed the button again to let him down gently.

"Wow!" said Gaspar and Robinson, who hadn't seen anything like that before, as Ramondo cut a slit by the ramp, through which they could return to the craft.

It was a good job this didn't take long as the rain coming in from outside increased. The Major and his team went back into the craft. He then contacted Professor Schmidt back on the 'Pilgrim, and asked for a weather report.

"Apparently, the rain shouldn't last too long," Professor Schmidt informed the Major. "It should die down before the sun will rise."

"Do you know how long we have?" asked Major Retono.

"Two Earth hours," Professor Schmidt told him.

"What's the time now?" asked Major Retono.

"Haven't you set your watch yet?" Professor Schmidt queried. "I left several watches with Professor Wagstaff. He should know where they've been put."

“Professor Wagstaff gave me something odd to put around my wrist,” Major Retono explained. “Could that be what you're referring to?”

“That will be your watch,” said Professor Schmidt. “Set it to 1.30. You do know how to set your watch, don't you?”

Major Retono wasn't too sure, so followed Professor Schmidt's instructions. He then ordered the rest of his team to do the same with their watches. As they waited for the rain to stop, they sorted out a number of items to take, for when they would eventually go outside. Though the rain relented at around 3.45, by this time there were more than just a few drops of water pouring down the pot-hole, so they didn't go out until just before 4.30.

Major Retono then led Lucas and Ramondo to the cave entrance. With their torches shining through the cave, they noticed some small creatures with tails on the bed of the cave. There also appeared to be small winged creatures hanging from the tops of the cave. These were creatures that were unexpected.

They found the cave a little confusing, as there was more than one passage along the way. Eventually, they managed to find their way out of the cave and onto the open moor.

“Lucas, have you got the hidden cameras?” Major Retono asked, to which Lucas nodded. “Stay here and see if you can find some suitable places to put them, but don't switch them on. Ramondo and me are going for a little walk towards those buildings down the hillside.”

Major Retono contacted Professor Wagstaff back on the craft, to report they had exited the cave.

“According to the map I'm looking at, there's a small hamlet called Selside at the bottom of the hill,” said Professor Wagstaff. “Can you see a group of houses anywhere in the distance?”

“I can see what from here appear to be buildings at the bottom of the hill,” replied Major Retono. “I can't make them out precisely – it's too dark to tell.”

“Can you see a road or some tracks just beyond?” Professor Wagstaff asked Major Retono.

“I can see some things in the distance, but I'm not completely sure about them,” replied the Major. “I'm going to proceed down the hill, until I can get a better view. I'll contact you soon.”

Major Retono continued down the hill, while Ramondo stayed put, watching the Major walking away into the distance. As he got closer, Major Retono noticed a small road leading to some houses. This became

clearer as he went, partly due to the fact that some house window had become lit.

Major Retono looked at his watch, but proceeded until he got to the road. He then looked back towards where he came, and flashed his torch. He then saw another light beam towards him, a signal from Ramondo that he remained at the same place.

Major Retono then decided to proceed a little further, until he came to another, larger, road. As he looked up, he noticed that the navy-blue sky he saw earlier was now slowly becoming lighter and brighter. It was probably time to turn back. As he walked back along the minor road, he could see a small light getting larger as it came closer. He then heard two quick rings, as a man greeted him "Good Morning!" in an odd accent.

Major Retono greeted the man, and proceeded back along the road, until he found the path he'd followed earlier. He shone his torch, to which Ramondo shone his, confirming his position to the Major so he knew where to proceed. When he got to Ramondo, they could see the sky becoming brighter. Ramondo shone his torch towards the cave entrance. As Lucas shone his torch back in acknowledgement, Major Retono and Ramondo headed back.

By the time they all met up, they could see the sun beginning to rise over the fells. They each had one last look at the sky, before the three of them headed back into the cave and to the craft. They had seen a little bit of Earth for a few hours at least.

"Is there anything peculiar to report, Major?" Professor Wagstaff asked when they arrived back in the craft.

"There wasn't a lot to report on, to tell you the truth," replied Major Retono. "I came across an old man sitting upon a bar above a pair of wheels, whatever that might be."

"Probably a bicycle, I should have thought," suggested Professor Wagstaff. "I've seen a few people ride those. I can't say I'd fancy a trip on one of those things. Did the man say anything?"

"He greeted me, and went on his way," Major Retono told him.

"Are all the cameras carefully placed around the cave?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"Yes thanks," said Lucas. "I've placed each of them strategically, so as we can get a good view of all angles. I made sure they were all covered, in the event of rain, and hidden away inconspicuously."

"Good, good," said Professor Wagstaff. "I'll go and switch them all on then, see if we can detect any life around here."

"How far can the cameras see?" asked Lucas.

"Probably for about several Earth miles, as they're placed on the hill and looking down to the valley," said Professor Wagstaff. "I can extend or sharpen the views if required."

"I'd like one of you to keep an eye on the cameras at all times," instructed Major Retono. "We don't want to miss anything."

"I don't think we'll see much life around here, if you ask me," Ramondo commented.

"We can still replay any film if we miss something," said Professor Wagstaff.

"I know, I know, but that's not the point," said Major Retono. "Anyway, I don't know about any of you, but I'm feeling a little tired right now, so I'm going to get some rest. Wake me up if you come across anything significant."

While Major Retono was sleeping, two of the others took turns to watch the cameras. There seemed very little life, except for a few birds, sheep and insects. There appeared to be some people in the hamlet at the foot of the hill, but the pictures only showed the tops of a few heads behind garden fences. The main movements were down on the road beyond the hamlet, where small four-wheeled vehicles sped by in either direction. Every so often, another linked double-cabin transport vehicle could be seen running along tracks beyond the road. These seemed to run at regular intervals, so after about four had gone by, Professor Wagstaff went to call the Major.

"Major Retono, there's something that might be of interest," said Professor Wagstaff. "I think they're called trains. They take people from one place to another."

"Are they some kind of animal?" asked Major Retono

"No, no, no, they're a form of transport," Professor Wagstaff explained.

"You know those dual tracks on the other side of the valley we saw earlier. That's what they're designed for – for trains to run on them."

"Are you saying that there is intelligent life travelling on board these trains?" queried Major Retono.

"Yes, yes, very much so," replied Professor Wagstaff.

"So what are you alluding to?" asked the Major.

"Well, there are stations four, five miles down the line," said Professor Wagstaff. "You'll probably come across intelligent people there, getting on or off the trains."

“Hhmmm,” muttered Major Retono. “I remember seeing something on the tracks passing a bridge near the hamlet this morning. I could see a building further along the tracks, but I couldn't make out what it was. It wasn't lit-up at the time, though by the time I returned back to the cave, I noticed a light further up the valley.”

Professor Wagstaff took the Major to see the camera pictures. He then turned the camera looking towards the railway, and moved the view further up the valley. He then stopped when the station came into focus. There appeared to be two rectangular objects, possibly connected beside a platform.

“Interesting,” Major Retono muttered. “I suppose they're the trains.”

“Train carriages,” Professor Wagstaff corrected him.

No-one appeared to be alighting from the train however. After about 30 seconds, a man walked to the front carriage before walking back to the rear of the second carriage. He then seemed to board the carriage, before waving a flag. The train then slowly departed, gaining speed as it went.

“That's where we'll go tonight,” said Major Retono. “Professor, get me a map of the local area.”

Professor Wagstaff obliged.

As they each looked at the map, they noticed a broken red line heading up the valley.

Major Retono thought he knew where this might be, as he remembered noticing some steps beside a fence that morning, near the path from the hamlet. This broken red line led to the railway tracks. He then called Ramondo over.

As Professor Wagstaff looked at the map, he noticed that the broken red line represented a footpath, and pointed this out to the Major.

“I think we should follow that footpath tonight,” suggested Major Retono.

“We can then follow the railway line, until we get to the station. What do you say?”

Professor Wagstaff and Ramondo each agreed. They then called some of the others over to discuss this.

“We'll set off before dark,” instructed Major Retono. “That'll give us some time when we get to the station.”

“What if you come across someone?” asked Gaspar.

“We'll take that chance,” said Major Retono. “If anyone asks, we can say we've been caving.”

“Do you think anybody goes exploring caves?” queried Professor

Wagstaff.

"I don't know," replied Major Retono. "If we do come across someone, perhaps we could try having a conversation. We look similar, and speak the same tongue, after all. I've seen enough people to know that they won't exactly query if we're from outer space."

At about 8 pm that evening, Major Retono led a group of four, with Ramondo, Gaspar, Lucas and Madaly, through the cave. When they got to the entrance, they could see the sun just above Ingleborough, and moving ever-lower in the sky.

"Do you have the map with you?" he asked Gaspar.

"I'm just opening it, Major," Gaspar replied, before he put it on the ground. The wind was blowing, so Madaly put a few stones at each end to keep the map down. Major Retono then showed the broken red lines on the map, and pointed to the stile further along the footpath ahead.

"When we get to the stile, we should climb over it, and follow the footpath," Major Retono told the others. "This should lead to the railway line, those tracks you can just make out in the distance."

"Are you sure this will be okay?" Gaspar asked.

"It should be," said the Major. "The broken red lines are shown to be a public footpath, so this will give us right-of-way (I hope). If there are any problems, I've worked out an alternate route to follow."

"And what would that be, Major?" asked Ramondo.

"Our first aim is to get to the railway," said Major Retono. "If we can't get to it over the stile, we can continue along this path, which leads to the hamlet at the foot of the fell. From there we can get to the railway."

"What will we do when we get to the railway?" asked Lucas.

"We'll then follow the railway until we get to the station further up the valley," said Major Retono. "It should be safe, there don't appear to be any trains running at night."

They each took a deep breath, as they looked around the fells.

"Lucas, do you have the replicator?" the Major asked.

"Yes sir," Lucas replied.

Gaspar then picked up the map, before the Major led them away. When they reached the stile, Major Retono had a careful look ahead.

"This footpath seems to be okay," he told the others. "Follow me all of you, and stay close. If any of you get into difficulty, let the rest of us know. Don't try doing things by yourself, and end up getting left behind."

The others acknowledged him, and one by one climbed over the stile,

following Major Retono. The sun had by now gone behind the fells, and the sky was becoming darker. The walk to the railway line was quite pleasant, a gentle stroll downhill. They could feel the mild wind blowing in their faces. It was a feeling none of them were familiar with. Madaly put her arm around Lucas as they proceeded. Eventually, the footpath led to a small bridge, which crossed the railway and led to the main road.

"What do we do here, Major?" asked Ramondo. "It's a bit too high to jump from here onto the tracks below."

"I'm afraid you're right," replied Major Retono. "There isn't exactly a footpath beside the railway, but there's no fence either. As we've come this far, I think we should proceed beside the railway. This shouldn't be long – you can see the station ahead."

As they proceeded, the station became larger, and they could see rails leading off the main line, too. They continued until they came to the platform. Before the platform, however, were some wooden boards crossing the tracks.

"This must be a railway crossing," said Major Retono. "The main station building is on the other side of the railway. We'll cross the tracks and see what's there."

Major Retono first checked his watch. The time was 9.45 pm. He instructed the others to synchronise their watches, before checking both sides of the railway line. When he was confident the coast was clear, he led them across the tracks.

They noticed that what seemed to be a large station was in fact three small buildings. The first of them had a broken window, through which Gaspar shone his torch.

"Nothing in there, except a hole at the bottom of the wall," he told the others. "It probably leads up to that thing on top of the building."

"I think you mean chimney," emphasised Major Retono. "Can you see any doors?"

"I can see a door, just around the corner," said Gaspar.

"Lucas, go and see if you can open the door," the Major ordered. "If you can't get in, we may have to go in through the window."

Lucas tried to open the door, but found it to be locked tightly. He went back to inform the others.

"Gaspar, try to get into the building through the broken window," instructed Major Retono. "I'm going to see if I can break the door lock with my laser."

Major Retono went to the door. He saw a chain around the door, to which

he fired his laser. The chain broke, but when he went to try to open the door, he found it was locked. Major Retono looked for the lock, and then shone his torch at it, before firing his laser towards the lock. This time he opened the door, and found Gaspar inside.

"There don't appear to be any lights in the building, none which work anyway," Gaspar said to him. "Who'd live in a place like this?"

"Rats perhaps," said Major Retono.

As he shone his torch across the room, they indeed noticed rodents running along the floor.

"Shall I destroy them, sir?" Gaspar asked.

"Not at this moment," instructed Major Retono. "There are other things we need to sort out first. Lucas, have you got the replicator?"

"I've got it with me, sir," Lucas replied as he entered the building.

"Pass it to me," instructed Major Retono, before tuning the replicator towards lighting. He pointed it towards the light bulb on the ceiling. A light came on briefly, but then began to flicker before the light went altogether.

"The wiring is probably too old and damp to be of any use," Major Retono said to Lucas and Gaspar.

He pointed the replicator towards the light switch on the wall, before switching it off. He then pointed the replicator up the wall and along the ceiling, until it pointed at the light bulb. He then asked Gaspar to switch the light on. This time the light stayed on.

"How did you do that, sir?" asked Lucas.

"I was replicating the original wiring, bringing it up to date," said Major Retono. "Pretty useful device, this replicator, don't you think?"

Lucas and Gaspar looked at each other in awe. They then saw Major Retono point the replicator towards the skirting boards on the floor, before he did the same. What were old boards with mouse holes was now renewed, as was any wiring within it.

"How does that thing work, Major?" asked Gaspar.

"Come over here and I'll show you," he said to him. "You see this panel. There are a number of pre-designs tuned into it. If I direct the central arrow towards one of the designs and switch the replicator on, it will replicate whatever it's designed to do at the place at which the 'gun' is pointing at."

"But how does it do that, sir?" asked Lucas.

"Well, basically, it picks up atoms from behind the object, and breaks them down into their components," explained Major Retono.

"What does it do then, Major?" asked Gaspar.

"The replicator then merges the protons, neutrons and electrons to form the appropriate atoms which make up whatever its replicating," Major Retono explained. "It's all done at light-speed, which is why it seems instantaneous."

"Do you think I could have a go, please, sir?" asked Lucas.

Major Retono passed the replicator to Lucas, before looking around the room.

"Point the arrow towards 'door'," he instructed. "Now point the gun towards the door. When you're sure you've got the precise co-ordinates, switch it on."

Lucas indeed followed Major Retono's instructions, and in an instant, a new door had been created, with a small key falling to the ground. As Lucas went to try the key, he heard Ramondo and Madaly coming.

"It's getting cold out here," Ramondo said. "You don't mind if we come in?"

As Lucas went to let them both in, he passed the replicator to Gaspar, before locking the door. Major Retono then instructed Gaspar how to use the replicator, in order to create a new window.

"There we are," said the Major. "This room is now secure. Now we'll have to check out the other rooms in this building."

It took another half-hour to sort the rest of the room, and ensure everything was secure and in good working order. By now though, they each felt a little tired, so they created a couple of sofas.

"How about those rats?" asked Gaspar. "I haven't seen any of them recently."

"Oh I shouldn't worry about them," said Major Retono. "It was probably their atoms which the replicator 'consumed' before spitting them out as windows, doors and radiators. Some might say the replicator makes good use of vermin."

Major Retono then contacted Professor Wagstaff on the craft, to let him know all was well. He then noticed another door, and went to check what was behind it. More rodents!

"Gaspar, I think you'd better come here a moment," Major Retono instructed. "Bring the replcator with you."

"What's the matter, Major," he asked.

"It looks like we're going to have to do the same all over again," said Major Retono. "This room is in the same state that the last one was in. There's a broken window, too,"

"I thought I felt a draft from somewhere," commented Ramondo, as he came to inspect the room.

As they cleared and repaired the room, they noticed another door, which Major Retono went to check. He noticed more rodents running along a narrow corridor, and as he shone his torch, he noticed some stairs ahead. When the second room was finally sorted, they had a brief rest before sorting the hallway and staircase. Major Retono then went upstairs, only to find another dark, damp room, plus two doors, which probably led to more rooms.

"I think we have a few more rooms to sort out," he told the others, before feeling a drip on his head. As he looked up, he noticed a gap in the ceiling. "Something tells me this is going to take longer than I thought."

Major Retono then amended the replicator, to replicate itself. With two of them at hand, and a few people to use them, it may help complete the work sooner rather than later.

As it happened, it took all night and most of the early morning to repair the whole building, particularly the roof. Because of the rain that had seeped through the once-derelict building, the floorboards had to be repaired too. Though the process didn't require skips and scaffolding, everyone was worn out by 6.00 am, and rested on the sofas, chairs, and beds.

The Digital Car

Major Retono was awoken a few hours later when his mobile rang.

"Hello, hello, Major, can you hear me," he heard on the other end. "Come in if you can hear me."

It was Professor Wagstaff calling from the reconnaissance craft.

"Hello Professor," said Major Retono. "I can hear you loud and clear."

"Thank goodness for that!" replied Professor Wagstaff. "I was beginning to think you'd been captured by some thugs, or worse still, terrorists. I suppose the others are okay, too?"

"Yes, yes, Professor," said Major Retono. "I'm sorry if we've been sleeping 'on the job', but we've been very busy."

"Oh, what have you been up to?" asked the Professor curiously.

"This building we found was larger than first anticipated," Major Retono explained. "It required a lot of repairs, including roofing and floorboards, so you will excuse us if we're all a little worn-out."

"Oh that's alright, that's alright, that's alright, Major," said Professor Wagstaff. "It's just that some of us here would like to see Earth for ourselves. We're getting a little cramped in this craft."

"You didn't complain when there were ten of us in the craft," Major Retono

said to the Professor.

"That's because we only took a millisecond to arrive on Earth," Professor Wagstaff commented. "I know we were all in the craft yesterday, but even that was only for a few hours. One or two of you were always going out and exploring the cave and pot hole."

"Yeah, yeah, okay, Professor," said the Major. "I hear where you're coming from. I'll send you directions on how to get here from the cave. It might take a little while though."

"That's fine, that's fine," said Professor Wagstaff. "We'll meet you there at about 11.00am. Is that okay?"

"Sure, that's okay," Major Retono told him. "In the meantime, me and the others are a bit thirsty. Do you know if there's anywhere around here where we can get something to drink?"

"If you look on the map, you'll find a public house nearby," explained Professor Wagstaff. "Just go out of the station, and turn left. It'll be on the other side of the main road."

"Do you know what drinks they have in there?" asked Major Retono.

"I haven't got the foggiest," said Professor Wagstaff. "Perhaps you can let me know what you find. I suggest you take some money with you. I've already programmed the appropriate currency into the replicator."

It was around this time that the others began to awake, one by one, and by 8.30 they had agreed to go and find the public house. They followed Professor's Wagstaff's instructions, and sure enough, they noticed a large building on the other side of the road, with the title 'The Ribblehead Inn'.

"I suppose that's where the Professor was referring to?" queried Lucas, who had taken one replicator with him.

They all went to the door of the Ribblehead Inn, which they found to be open.

"Hello lads," a lady greeted them. "Would you like something to drink?"

Major Retono and the others all looked at each other.

"You'd better hurry up if you're drinking," the lady told them. "We'll be closing in another half-hour."

This was the first time any of them had seen a pub, so they were all a little uncertain of what to say. Major Retono quickly decided to go up to the bar.

"What drinks do you have?" he asked the bar-lady.

"This is a free-house," she told him. "We have a wide range of bitters, or lagers for those southern-softies, plus Guinness, Murphy's or cider. Or if you'd like something stronger, we have vodka or scotch. Take your choice,

but don't dwell too long on it."

Major Retono ordered one vodka, one whisky, two Guinness and a lager.

"That'll be £17.67," as she served the drink.

Major Retono began to wonder what he should do to pay for the drinks, as he didn't have any money on him.

"Don't worry," the bar-lady then said to him. "You can pay me when you've finished your drinks."

Major Retono said thank you before taking the drinks away on a tray.

"Lucas, pass me the replicator," he asked when he got to the table, remembering what Professor Wagstaff had said about money. He then took it outside, where he replicated a £20 note.

When he went back into the pub, he noticed the others weren't too keen on their beverages.

"What's this?" Ramondo asked.

"I think that's vodka, if I remember correctly," he told Ramondo.

"Strange taste," said Ramondo. "I thought vodka was another star system in the galaxy. You don't suppose this drink comes all the way from there, do you? Perhaps it decayed a little on it's journey."

"I doubt very much anyone would transport a drink like that across the universe," commented Gaspar.

"He's right," agreed Major Retono. "Besides, vodka is just the short name of a binary star system, Vodkarina-Maningiatis."

A couple of men on the next table then moved away, believing someone may have had meningitis!

As none of them were too keen on their drinks, they were still at the table after 9.00 am.

"When are you thinking of leaving?" the bar-lady said to them. "This place is due to close now."

"I don't suppose you get much custom here?" Major Retono asked, in curiosity.

"Oh, I think you might be surprised," she replied. "We'll be re-opening at 7.30 tonight, if you'd like to come back. We'll be a bit busier by that time."

"I might see you again sometime," Major Retono said to the bar-lady, before giving her the twenty pound note.

When the bar-lady gave him the change, he counted the money, to make sure he had understood the values of the currency correctly.

"Don't worry, you've got the right change," the bar-lady said to him before walking away.

Major Retono thought it best to leave now, and suggested this to the

others. They soon finished their drinks and left.

"Major, do you think we could replicate that vehicle over there?" Lucas asked, pointing to the car parked behind the pub.

"Hhmmm," Major Retono muttered. "I'm not too sure if it's a good idea."

"Oh come on, Major," begged Lucas. "We don't have any transport of our own. We probably need something like that to get around this place."

"I reckon he's right," said Ramondo. "You can't expect us to keep walking all the time? Particularly if we're going to explore this whole area."

"I agree," added Gaspar. "Surely if we can replicate that building, it shouldn't take long to copy that vehicle over there?"

"Okay, but be quick about it," said Major Retono. "You three can go and replicate the vehicle. Madaly and me will stay here in case anyone comes this way."

As it happened, it didn't take long to replicate the car. The problems began when Lucas went to try to open the driver's door, and found it to be locked. He tried the other doors, but found them locked too.

Major Retono instructed Madaly to stay put, while he went to help the others. He looked carefully into the car, and noticed what appeared to be a keyhole beneath the driver's wheel. He took the replicator, set it the key mode, and produced a key. Sure enough, it opened the car door.

Major Retono then sat in the car, trying to turn on the ignition. He managed to get the engine running, but when he tried maneuvering the car, it wouldn't move, despite how much he pressed onto the accelerator. Lucas then suggested to try using the gearstick. Major Retono tried this a few times, but when he left the car in first gear, he found it jumped at first, and then moved slowly making a loud noise.

Major Retono then remembered there was more than one pedal at his feet. He tried moving the gearstick in conjunction with the left pedal, and found this to work well. The problem had been sorted. Or so he thought.

As he called Madaly over, to get into the car, a man came out of the pub.

"Oi! What do you think you're up to?" the man shouted as the car was about to pull away. "What are you doing in my car?"

Major Retono stopped the car, as he tried to think of what to say.

"Hello, sir," he replied. "Can I help at all?"

"Yes," replied the man in no uncertain terms. "You can start by getting out of my car, or I'll call the police."

"I'm sorry, there must be some mistake," Major Retono said to him. "This is my vehicle. There is a similar vehicle in the car park."

“Well you must have got in the wrong car because that’s my car’s registration,” the man, who happened to be the landlord of The Ribblehead Inn, replied.

Major Retono switched the engine off and got out of the car, unsure of what to say next. Before he knew it, the landlord snatched the keys to the car. He checked them against the keys in his pocket, and found them to be very similar.

“Okay, let’s go and see this other car in the car park,” he said to Major Retono.

“Can I have my keys back, please?” Major Retono asked.

“When I’ve seen this other car,” the landlord said to him.

The car park wasn’t far away, just behind the pub. When they reached the car park, the landlord was surprised to see the bar-lady, who happened to be his wife, standing beside another green Nissan Primera.

“There you are!” she said aloud to her husband. “Where the hell have you been – half way up Ingleborough!”

The landlord looked at the car in disbelief. He looked carefully at the number plate, and noticed they were the same.

“Well come on then,” the landlady cried out. “We’ve got an appointment to go to. I doubt we’ll be in Kendal by 10 at this rate.”

The landlord took one more look at the number plates, before handing the keys back to Major Retono. While the Major said goodbye, the landlord said nothing, a little dumbfounded that two cars could have the same registration, and which happened to be the same make model and engine size.

Major Retono walked back to his car. As he got in, the others asked what had happened, and while they were in discussion, the other Primera sped past them, and onto the main road. Major Retono and his team tried to follow them, but to no avail. He noticed a wide space on the other side of the road, quickly turned the car, crossing the grass verge, before they went ‘home’.

When they arrived, Major Retono contacted Professor Wagstaff.

“Whereabouts are you at the moment?” he asked.

“We’ve just come out of the cave,” Professor Wagstaff told him. “We shouldn’t be too long. Gonchaves is manning the craft for the time being.”

“That route I suggested you follow - forget it for now.” Major Retono instructed. “Just follow the path until you reach the hamlet. A couple of us will be waiting for you there.”

“That shouldn’t be necessary,” said Professor Wagstaff. “I think we can

find the way ourselves.”

“I don’t doubt you could,” replied Major Retono. “We have some transport, however, in which we can pick you up. It’ll save a bit of time, and will probably be less suspicious, not to say dangerous. I don’t want any of you walking along the railway line at this time of the day.”

Lucas then went to ask the Major if he could drive the car. Major Retono wasn’t too sure at first, but then he thought that it may be handy having a second person who could drive. Perhaps Lucas could give him a lift to Selside and pick up the Professor’s party, while he could go back to the craft to get some rest and speak to Commander Ondichi.

“Would you mind if I had a go at driving the car, sir?” Lucas asked again.

“Okay, but you’d better let me show you how to drive the car – it may need a bit of getting used to,” Major Retono told him. “Oh, and you’d better amend the number plates at the back and front of the car.”

Lucas was a little excited, but fortunately, didn’t take too long to get the hang of driving the car. He seemed quite sure of himself, and indeed, as he drove the car to Selside, he didn’t seem out-of-place driving along the road. Where he wasn’t too sure, he used a lower gear, even though it sounded a bit noisy.

When he and Major Retono arrived at the minor road which, from where the footpath to cave began, Professor Wagstaff and his party were already waiting.

“I see you have an escort,” he said to the Major, but when he had a closer look at who was driving, he was rather surprised.

“Don’t worry, Professor,” Major Retono said to him as he got out of the car. “Lucas seems okay with the vehicle. I thought it may be helpful if he took you all back to where we’re staying at. I don’t want you walking along that railway track – have you noticed how big some of those trains are? I wouldn’t want any of you to end up beneath one of them.”

“Well if you’re sure about this...” Professor Wagstaff said to the Major, before counting the seats inside the car. “Are there enough seats for all of us?”

“There’ll only be five of you in the car, as I won’t be going back this time,” Major Retono replied. “I want to speak to the Commander, and give him a report on how things are coming along down here.”

“Will you be coming back later today?” Professor Wagstaff asked him.

“I’m not sure,” replied Major Retono. “From what I heard in the pub earlier, there may be rules and regulations we will have to abide by. I want to check on any legal technicalities, too – we don’t want to do something

which isn't legitimate. Which reminds me, tell Lucas and Ramondo amend the car registration."

Major Retono then waved farewell, as Professor Wagstaff got into the car. The journey was brief, though a little bumpy. Professor Wagstaff asked Lucas a couple of times if he knew what he was doing, to which Lucas replied everything was fine.

When they arrived at the new house, everyone was happy to be re-united. Lucas wasn't allowed to see much of his girlfriend Zebrina, as Professor Wagstaff reminded him he had to amend the car registration.

When the others had gone inside, Lucas looked around the car. He managed to take the front number plate off, and with a little help from the replicator, changed the registration. He then took this to the back of the car and copied the registration onto the rear number plate.

Lucas became rather curious, as he noticed something round beneath the rear of the car. As he felt it, and then managed to look under the car, he noticed this was a spare tyre. He then looked into the boot, where he could tell there was something under the 'carpet' of the boot, which he noticed was the jack.

Lucas started playing around with the jack, and after a short while realised what this was for. He then looked under the car to find where to place this, and before long, managed to jack the car up from its rear.

"What are you up to?" shouted Ramondo.

"I'm just looking at the car," Lucas replied. "I want to know how it works. Why don't you come along and give me some help?"

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Ramondo, as he went over to see Lucas. "The Professor sent me here to check up on you."

"At least one of us needs to know how this thing works," emphasised Lucas. "What if there's an accident? How are we going to repair something we don't know anything about?"

"How do you know we're going to have an accident?" queried Ramondo.

"I don't," replied Lucas. "But if the roads or tracks, or whatever they're called here, are as bumpy as the one we went along, there's bound to be accidents."

"Never mind any future accidents," said Ramondo. "Have you amended the car registration yet?"

They then heard Zebrina call from the house, asking if they wanted a drink or a bite to eat. Lucas and Ramondo looked at each other.

"Go and get us something," Lucas said to Ramondo. "I'll be sitting on that

mound of grass nearby.”

Lucas then jacked the car down, and fitted the amended number plates to it. He then looked at the car to try to open the engine, before Ramondo and Zebrina brought some drinks and biscuits along. They then went and sat down.

“I’m sure I can do something with this car,” Lucas kept saying. “I’m beginning to see how this thing runs, and I’m sure I can do something better with the car.”

“You don’t want to do something silly with the car, and end up upsetting the Major,” Zebrina told him.

Ramondo then took the replicator, and in a short space of time, created a new car, exactly the same as the other car.

“What did you do that for?” Lucas asked. “Now I’m going to have to change the registration again.”

“Look, silly, I’ve created another car, just in case you end up messing up this one,” Ramondo said to him. “Like Zebrina said, you don’t want to upset the Major. Besides, we now have a spare car – what’s wrong with having two?”

Lucas stared at Ramondo, uncertain of what to say. Before he could think of anything, Lucas whispered to Zebrina to go back and distract Professor Wagstaff and the others.

“I know how you feel,” Ramondo then conferred to Lucas. “From what I’ve seen of this car, and the others that have passed by on the road, I know we can build something a lot better. Now, we can go for a little ride, find somewhere quiet, and have a good look at the car without anyone wondering what we’re up to. And we can be safe in the knowledge that if we mess up the car, there’ll be another one back here for the Major.”

Lucas was now coming around to the same way of thinking. As he quickly got into the car, Ramondo grabbed the replicator, and before long they were gone.

Major Retono, meanwhile, was becoming ‘bogged-down’ and a little confused with all the regulations and licenses which were required for just about everything. To own a car, you were required to hold a Driving Licence; and the car had to be insured, taxed and tested every year. Where should he go to for all these requirements?

He then found ownership of property no less confusing. First of all, the property had to be within a local council, for which an annual tax had to be paid. But what was this for? Any development required planning

permission by the council. Would this be required for the 'development' of the building he and the others had 'acquired'?

The more he tried to find out, the more regulations he found, such as passports, National Insurance numbers, and Birth, Death and Marriage certificates. It also appeared that everyone had at least two names. In all the confusion, he contacted Professor Schmidt, to ask him how much he had found out about these requirements.

Professor Wagstaff, in the meantime, was getting a little concerned. There had been no sign of Lucas or Ramondo for several hours. Zebrina had said they had gone for a walk, but where could they have gone to? In addition, they hadn't taken their mobiles with them. As for Major Retono, it seemed his line was constantly engaged. Surely he couldn't be on the line to Commander Ondichi all this time?

The sun was now beginning to go down, when there was a knock on the front door. To the Professor's surprise, it was Lucas and Ramondo.

"Where have you two been all this time?" he asked them. "We were beginning to think you'd been captured, and taken away somewhere for interrogation. On top of that, you both left your mobiles here. And where is the replicator? I suppose you've gone and lost it, and been searching the fells for it?"

"No Professor," said Ramondo. "We've just been looking around, in an effort to get to know this place. We even spoke to a few people, not that we came across many."

"The replicator's in the car, by the way," Lucas told Professor Wagstaff.

"Whereabouts in the car?" asked Professor Wagstaff. "The car's been here all day, and I haven't seen the replicator. I've even looked in the boot and underneath it. Perhaps you'd better show me."

"It's not in the car you're looking at," Ramondo replied. "It's in the new one, behind the station."

Professor Wagstaff looked towards the station and saw another car, identical to the one at the back of the house.

"Have you replicated the car?" Professor Wagstaff asked the lads curiously.

"You could say that," Lucas replied. "But we've also made some improvements to the car," he added.

Professor Wagstaff was becoming more curious, but as he was about to walk the lads to the car, Gaspar called him over.

"What is it now?" the Professor groaned.

“Major Retono’s on the mobile,” Gaspar replied, as he passed the mobile to the Professor.

“I’ll deal with you two later,” he said to Ramondo and Lucas, before speaking to Major Retono. “Are you okay? I’ve been trying to contact you all day – is something the matter?”

“I’m sorry Professor, but it’s these regulations and requirements,” Major Retono told him. “I need to speak to you urgently about some of them. Professor Schmidt has helped me a little, but he says you’re the man I need to speak to.”

“I’m not really familiar with this stuff myself,” Professor Wagstaff mumbled. “I’ll see if I can help in any way, but I can’t promise anything. Are you coming back here tonight or do you want me to return to the craft?”

“No, no, it can wait for now,” said Major Retono. “I’m tired to say the least, so I’ll see you tomorrow. Tell Lucas to meet me near Selside, where he picked you up, at 9.30 tomorrow morning.”

Lucas and Ramondo then offered to take Professor Wagstaff to the car, but as the sun had now gone down, and the Major wasn’t coming back tonight, he suggested to leave things for the time being, but to ensure the car was in good order, and with a new registration, by the following morning.

Major Retono was bright and alert by the next morning. Lucas went to pick him up, as instructed, in the standard Primera, so as not to make anything obvious to the Major. The number plates had been changed too, so they wouldn’t clash with the modified version. When they arrived back at the house, Major Retono noticed a similar model.

“Did you replicate this car?” he asked Lucas.

“You could say that,” Lucas replied. “With a bit of help from Ramondo. Would you like to have a look at it?”

“Not at this moment,” Major Retono told him. “I have a few concerns I must discuss with Professor Wagstaff.”

“Oh?” said Lucas. “What might they be? Could I help?”

“No, son, I need to sort some legal matters with the Professor,” Major Retono told him. “I think it would be best if you and the others went out and about today. Leave me and the Professor alone.”

“Where shall we go?” asked Lucas.

“That’s up to you,” said the Major who was getting a little agitated. “Why don’t you take a trip on one of those trains. Meet some humans. Come

back to me and let me know what you've found."

Major Retono then gave Lucas some money as he opened the door to the house. He then went over to Professor Wagstaff and took him into the next room. The others all looked at each other, wondering what was going on, before Lucas raised his voice.

"I think we'd be best to leave them alone," he told the others. "Major Retono gave me some money to go on a train. Would any of you like to come with me?"

Most of the others agreed to go along with him, but Ramondo preferred to stay and try out the modified Primera. Zebrina wanted to go along with him, so while the others put some things together to take along, she and Ramondo went to the modified Primera, and before long, had left the premises.

In the house meanwhile, Major Retono was about to raise several queries with Professor Wagstaff.

"My primary concern, of which I have more than a few, is the ownership of this house," said the Major. "First of all, I was unable to trace precisely who owns, or owned, this place. In trying to do so, however, I found a number of other issues."

"I have a few concerns myself, which is partly why I wasn't too keen to come here for reconnaissance," said Professor Wagstaff.

"The first thing I noticed was that planning permission would be necessary when developing property," Major Retono stated. "When seeking from whom this planning permission is given by, I found that this is by the local council. Then I found we are liable to pay council tax, and we have to be registered as home-owners. Which led back to the initial question, precisely who owned the property in the first place?"

"Okay, okay, okay, calm down a minute," Professor Wagstaff advised him. "I've made some contingency plans for this. If we go back to the craft I can show you."

The Major and the Professor then left the house. They noticed that one of the cars had gone.

"I doubt the others could all have fitted into one car," Professor Wagstaff commented.

"I gave Lucas some money, and suggested to go on one of those trains," said Major Retono.

"I'll bet Ramondo took the other car," said Professor Wagstaff.

"Can he drive that thing?" asked the Major.

"I don't know," replied Professor Wagstaff. "Apparently, he helped Lucas

create the car yesterday. Perhaps Lucas has gone with him, and gave the money to Gaspar.”

“Hhmmm, possibly,” said Major Retono. “Anyway, I’ve other concerns at the moment. If I’m supposed to go to the local council, what do you think they’d say if I told them my forefathers left this planet 65 million years ago, and I’ve just come back to stake my claim?”

“Don’t worry Major, all will be revealed,” said Professor Wagstaff.

The Professor then told him about his contingency plans on way back to the craft, and that the details were on the computer. As the Major raised further concerns along the way, Professor Wagstaff became a little more concerned himself.

When they arrived back at the craft, he logged into the World Wide Web, and found his way into the records of Upper Ribblesdale District Council.

“If you look here, I’ve registered the house as ‘Ribblehead Cottage, Gauber Road’ in the name of Major Retono,” he quickly showed the Major.

“What about the council tax?” Major Retono queried. “Will I receive an invoice for this? How will I pay for the tax? Can we create money just by using the replicator? Will the council accept the money?”

“Don’t worry,” Professor Wagstaff said to him. “I’ve already registered a payment for this against your records. No-one will notice any problem.”

“How much was this for?” the Major asked, as Professor Wagstaff took the cursor line across the screen to the payment column. “One thousand, five hundred pounds!” he then exclaimed. “Is this paid monthly?”

“No, no, no,” Professor Wagstaff told him. “This is paid once a year, so you won’t have to worry about this for eleven months. Only local rent is paid monthly. As you now officially own Ribblehead Cottage, you don’t have to pay rent.”

“Phew!” said a relieved Major, before something else came to mind. “I’ve noticed that all registered people have at least two names. Perhaps we’d better arrange second names for the others.”

“Hhmm, good point,” muttered Professor Wagstaff. “It had crossed my mind, but I thought I’d better speak to you first. Do you have any names you think may suit the crew, or should we select names at random?”

“Not at this moment,” replied the Major. “I’d prefer to sort out some other matters for now. We can discuss this item later.”

Meanwhile, Ramondo was cruising along in the second car, which unbeknown to Major Retono and Professor Wagstaff had been internally re-modeled. He was quite excited to be ‘let-go’ for once, as was Zebrina,

who was in the car with him. They couldn't go too far, though, as they didn't have any money with them, so turned back after a while. When they arrived back at soon-to-be-named 'Ribblehead Cottage', they found the door locked and no-one inside, so went off for a wander.

As they walked past the entrance to Ribblehead railway station, Ramondo went to see if the Ribblehead Inn, just around the corner, was open. Zebrina, who was following behind, noticed what appeared to be a cave, and called Ramondo over, as she went inside for a look.

Ramondo, however, hadn't heard her and continued walking towards the Inn. When he found it locked, he went around the back to see if anyone was there, presuming Zebrina was behind him. When he noticed she wasn't, he called out for her, but to no avail. Where could she be, he wondered?

Zebrina, meanwhile, was searching through the cave, presuming Ramondo was behind her. When she called out for him, however, she heard no reply, only her own echo. But by this time it was too late. Zebrina turned back, but the cave was dark and she couldn't tell where she was going. She didn't think it would be too much of a problem to find the entrance, as she hadn't got too far. Or so she thought?

As Zebrina continued in search of the cave entrance, it became clear that she had become lost. She used the light from her mobile to guide her, but there seemed to be no daylight coming from anywhere. As she continued, she noticed paths converging at a couple of points. Each time, she followed a path it either came to a big drop, or else the cave became smaller and smaller giving her less room to manoeuvre.

Zebrina was now becoming desperate. For a while she sat crying to herself, echoes going around the cave again and again. Zebrina managed to pull herself together, and decided that sitting crying in a dark cave would certainly not help her find the entrance. She felt it would be best to at least follow a path, and so began to search for the entrance again.

As Zebrina continued her search, she eventually noticed what appeared to be light up ahead. As the path became lighter and lighter, she thought that must be the cave entrance ahead. Or was it?

The further she walked, she noticed rays of sunlight beaming downwards. Zebrina became curious, and decided to walk carefully, which was a good job, as she eventually noticed the sunlight was coming from a hole, like the one the craft had landed in. She hadn't arrived at the cave entrance, but at a pot hole.

"Help!" she cried. "Help me, someone!"

Zebrina sat down and sobbed, particularly after she noticed how deep the pot hole was. Then, to her astonishment, she heard someone call out "Hello, is someone down there?" Zebrina stood up and cried out for help again.

"Where are you?" she then heard the voice call.

"I'm at the end of a path that leads into this big hole," Zebrina replied. "I wandered into the cave and became lost. Can you help me, please?"

Zebrina became anxious, awaiting a reply. For a few minutes, but what seemed like an hour, she thought that was it. And all the time, the sunlight was decreasing.

"Okay, I'm coming to get you," she then heard a voice call. "Stay where you are - don't move."

Zebrina wanted to jump for joy, if only the cave was high enough, before hearing a voice query "Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," she shouted back. "I promise I won't go anywhere."

As the person abseiled down the pot hole, he kept in contact with Zebrina. It seemed a long while before the voice could actually be identified, but while the light still shone into the pot hole, the man appeared ahead.

"I'm here, I'm here," Zebrina shouted to him.

As the man shone his torch towards a gap in the pot-hole-walls, he saw Zebrina, waiving and calling to him.

The man then called to her, to which Zebrina replied to say she could see him. He then asked his colleagues for more leverage of the rope, before he swung into the cave.

"Are you alright?" he asked Zebrina.

"Physically I'm okay," she replied, though it was obvious she was a nervous wreck.

"I'm going to put this rope around you, and hook it together with me, for safety," he told her. "My friends up above are going to winch us up. You don't need to do anything, just keep hold of me tightly. I'll make sure everything's fine."

After he checked that they were both fastened safely to the rope, he called to his colleagues above to pull them up. It seemed an eternity as they were being winched up, but before the sun had gone down, they were back on terra firma. She hugged the man who had picked her up, and thanked his colleagues. The men were in a hurry to get home, however, but as they walked down the fell to the car park Zebrina introduced herself. They had offered to give her a lift home, but unfortunately, they only had one car between them and so there wasn't

enough room to pick up Zebrina.

"Don't worry," she said to the lads, "I'll call my boyfriend to come and pick me up."

While Zebrina was calling Ramondo on her mobile, the lads decided that one of them should stay back with Zebrina until Ramondo arrived, and by the time she came off her mobile, most of the lads waived farewell to her before driving off. Zebrina then turned to the lad who remained to guard her.

"I never really had a chance to ask you your name?" she then said to him.

"My name's Richard," the lad replied. "Richard Copeland. I reckon your boyfriend's a lucky lad."

"Oh, why's that?" Zebrina queried, unaware of what Richard was eluding to.

"To have a girlfriend like you," he replied.

As Zebrina blushed, Richard put his arms around her. For a few seconds they looked into each other's eyes, before Zebrina's mobile sounded. It was Ramondo, asking where precisely she was. Zebrina then handed her mobile to Richard, who could better describe where they were. He then went to the roadside, and shone his torch to indicate their position. A few minutes later, a Nissan Primera pulled up in the car park.

"Zebrina, where the hell did you get to?" Ramondo asked her.

"Never mind, I'll tell you later," she replied. "Can you take us back to Ribbleshead station, quickly - Richard has a train to catch."

"Do you have far to travel?" Ramondo asked Richard.

"Not really. My mates have all gone home now, while I was looking after, this nice young lady," Richard replied, before turning to Zebrina. "What is your name, by the way?"

"Zebrina," she replied, before introducing Ramondo.

Introductions now over, they then got into the car. As they approached the station however, they saw a train crossing Ribbleshead viaduct, on its way to Carlisle.

"It looks like I've missed the last train," Richard said to Ramondo and Zebrina. "You wouldn't mind taking me home, would you?"

"No, that's no problem," said Ramondo. "That's the least we could do, from what I've heard. I don't really know my way around these parts, though, so you'll probably have to direct me."

Ramondo then pulled over and suggested Richard sit in the front of the car, while Zebrina rang Major Retono, who was by now back at Ribbleshead Cottage. Then, as Ramondo drove off, Richard became

curious when he looked at the wheel and dashboard of the car.

"Where did you get this from?" he asked. "I've not seen anything like it before. Is it the latest model?"

"I actually developed this with a friend of mine," Ramondo told him.

"Is this an automatic?" Richard then asked. "I see you haven't got a gearstick."

"That thing between the front seats, you mean?" Ramondo queried. "We got rid of that. We developed a better way of controlling the gears. You see these buttons on the steering wheel – I find them a lot easier to handle."

Richard was becoming more and more curious, and asked how the buttons changed the gears of the car.

"Oh they're controlled by micro-thingamyjigs," explained Ramondo.

"There's one for each of these buttons, which sends a message to other whatchamicallits attached to the front wheels. Between them, they determine the speed of this car."

"Micro-chips," said Richard, "You mean micro-chips, don't you?"

"Yeah, that's them," Ramondo replied. "Sorry if I don't sound too sure about things, but I'm not from around here."

Richard said he understood, but was more curious about the car than ever.

"Does this car run on petrol or diesel?" he then asked.

"You mean that old, dirty hydro-carbon fuel?" queried Ramondo.

"Yeah, that's it," Richard laughed. "Does this car run on fuel?"

"No," said Ramondo. "That was another thing we got rid of. This car still has a big battery in the engine, but that's now used to power the micro-chips. I prefer this as it saves fuel. Plus it doesn't cost anything to run."

"Except for the maintenance, I suppose," queried Richard.

"Oh yeah, it still needs to be maintained," said Ramondo. "Me and my mate haven't yet designed anything that doesn't require regular maintenance. Where did you say you were going?"

"Gawthrop," said Richard. "It's a small village a little further down the valley. I'll let you know when we get there."

Richard then contacted his friends to let them know he was okay. He told them not to wait at Dent station for him, or to drive back to Ribbleshead to pick him up, as he was being taken home. As they continued the journey, Zebrina and Ramondo were very happy to be talking to someone from another world, and were pleased to have struck up a new friendship. Richard, too, was pleased to make new friends, but was more fascinated

by the car.

“Have you patented this car yet?” he then asked Ramondo, who was unsure of what to say. “Have you sold your design to anyone yet?”

“No, not yet,” Ramondo replied, still a little unsure. “We only just designed this yesterday.”

“Well, I tell you what, how would you like me to help you,” Richard said to him. “My dad works for the military. I’m sure he could point you in the right direction. Speaking of which, take the next left turn. My home is a just a little further on.”

Ramondo almost missed the turning, but fortunately there were no other vehicles coming in the opposite direction, and he managed to turn quickly.

“I see you don’t have to slow down too much prior to turning,” Richard commented. “You’ll have to show me this car some other time. I think it’s marvelous, just what the world needs right now. ”

Richard then asked Ramondo to pull over, as they arrived outside his home. He then gave Ramondo his mobile number. Ramondo gave his mobile number, but to Richard, it seemed very odd, not the usual eleven-digit ‘07’ number, but just a five digit number instead. Richard queried this but Ramondo suggested Richard dial the number, and to his astonishment, Ramondo’s mobile rang. Richard then asked Ramondo and Zebrina where they were from, but they were unsure of what to say. In the end, when Richard asked if they were Spanish, Ramondo and Zebrina each said yes. Just then, the front door of the house opened.

“Is that you Richard?” queried his father, Peter, before walking up to the gate, where he noticed it was indeed Richard with some new friends. Ramondo and Zebrina greeted Peter, who invited them inside.

“Thanks, but I think we’d better be getting home ourselves,” said Zebrina. “We’ve had a long day, to say the least.”

“Where are you staying?” asked Peter. “Do you have far to go?”

“Ribblehead,” Ramondo replied. “I’m not used to this region, but I think I know my way home.”

“That’s not too far. I can drive there, if you like,” Peter suggested. “You can follow me in your car.”

Ramondo and Zebrina weren’t too sure whether to accept the offer, but said thank you all the same, before waving farewell. Richard then told his father about the car he had traveled in. Peter was unsure at first, but became more and more intrigued the more Richard talked about it.

“I’ll tell you what, son,” he said to Richard, as he closed the front door of the house. “Why don’t you invite them along this weekend, so I can see if

the car's as good as you claim it to be."

Meanwhile, as Ramondo drove home, Zebrina contacted Major Retono, who had by now sorted his concerns with Professor Wagstaff and was back at Ribblehead Cottage.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded to know. "Lucas and Madaly are out driving around in case you two lost your bearings, and Gaspar and Frickas are wandering the fells in search of you as well."

"We're very sorry, Major," she apologised. "I got lost in a cave and someone saved me. He missed his train, so we took him home. We wanted to contact you earlier, but we weren't sure whether to do so while the lad was in the car. That's why I've contacted you now as soon as we took him home."

"Whereabouts are you at the moment?" Major Retono asked. "Not to far away, I hope."

"No, we haven't got far to go, Major," Zebrina informed him. "We're just going under a railway viaduct, not the big one at Ribblehead, the next viaduct along, I think."

"Okay, well get here soon," the Major told her. "I'm going to call the search parties to return home. I'll speak to you and Ramondo later."

When Ramondo and Zebrina arrived back at Ribblehead Cottage, they noticed a similar car pull into the drive. It was Lucas and Madaly, who were just pleased to see that their colleagues were fine. The four of them all went inside together, where Major Retono was waiting for them. Ramondo and Zebrina knew they were in trouble, as the Major stared at them angrily, before taking them upstairs and into a quiet room to get some privacy.

Though Major Retono was usually a mild-mannered man, he was not the sort of man you would want to cross. First of all, he let them explain everything that had happened, before he spoke severely to Zebrina, firstly for getting lost and not keeping in close contact with Ramondo.

"This is not the Interstellar Pilgrim," he told her. "This is another world altogether. I gave strict instructions that all parties are to stay in close contact and to be careful not to lose sight of each-other. So how the hell did you end up going into a cave in the first place?"

"I'm very sorry Major," Zebrina apologised. "I didn't mean to get lost, really I didn't."

"Well why didn't you keep in close contact with Ramondo?" Major Retono asked her. "You only had to keep sight of him, but you couldn't even do

that! I'm very disappointed with you, very disappointed indeed."

Zebrina became very embarrassed, and couldn't say anything.

"Surely, when you went into the cave you must have called out to Ramondo?" Major Retono queried.

"I, I, think I did," Zebrina said to him. "I'm not certain, but I think I did."

"Do you recall hearing Zebrina going into the cave?" Major Retono then asked Ramondo.

"I don't remember, Major," he replied. "I don't recall hearing Zebrina."

"Well why didn't you look behind you?" asked Major Retono. "You did look behind you for Zebrina, didn't you?"

"I can't remember, Major," he replied again. "I think I was watching the road, making sure there were no cars coming."

"You were more interested in going to the Inn, rather than looking out for Zebrina, you mean," Major Retono accused him.

Ramondo felt this wasn't so and wanted to deny the accusation, but didn't want to make an argument with the Major, so said nothing. He thought he'd made the right choice when Major Retono turned to Zebrina again.

"So, why in the cosmos did you proceed in the cave without keeping close attendance with Ramondo?" the Major asked her.

"I thought Ramondo wasn't far behind me, Major," she replied. "I really thought he was following me. I did stop and turn back when I couldn't see him."

"Well you should have stopped earlier, a lot earlier," Major Retono told her. "When you did stop and turn back it was too late."

"I'm sorry Major, it won't happen again," she said to him. "I promise. I know I was very fortunate to be rescued, but we did make some new friends in all this."

"I'm pleased to hear that you made friends with people from Earth," said Major Retono. "However, I must point out that though people may look and speak the same as us, this is an alien world. It was decided to land here because this seemed a stable and democratic nation. I can assure you that if you had become lost on other parts of Earth, local people would have ignored your pleas, or worse still, taken you in as a slave, or even cut your throat. I have given instructions that we must stay together in groups at all times, and to keep close contact with each other. Do I make myself clear?"

Zebrina nodded her head, trying to hold back her tears and embarrassment. Major Retono stared at Zebrina for a few moments, before he excused her, but told Ramondo to stay seated.

"I didn't lose myself, Major," Ramondo then said, as he became a little desperate after Zebrina closed the door to the room.

"No, but you have acknowledged that you could have maintained better contact with Zebrina," Major Retono said to him.

Again, Ramondo wanted to deny this, but felt he shouldn't argue with the Major, so said nothing.

"This is beside the point, anyway, as there are other matters I wish to discuss with you," Major Retono added.

Ramondo was unsure what concerned the Major, and for a few moments considered that it may be complimentary, for making new friends and creating the new car. But then he remembered that Major Retono hadn't yet seen the new car, so the little excitement he briefly felt soon vanished.

"You were driving a car, weren't you?" Major Retono asked him, to which Ramondo acknowledged. "Who gave you permission to drive?"

Ramondo was unsure how to reply, so just said he hadn't thought permission was necessary.

"Didn't you consider asking me first?" Major Retono then asked, to which Ramondo simply apologised. He stared rather angrily at Ramondo, before saying, "Once again, I find that my authority has been ignored."

Once again, Ramondo apologised, and added that he would seek the Major's authority in future.

"We had one car, if I remember correctly?" Major Retono then queried, goading Ramondo to confirm this. "How did you come about the second car? Did you steal it? Did you buy it from your new friends?"

"No, Major," he replied. "Me and Lucas created it with the replicator."

Major Retono then called Lucas into the room, to confirm this. He then told them both that he had no objections to them using the replicator, but stipulated that they first needed his authority, and that he should be notified as to what they wished to use it for. Lucas then said that they had created a new car, and re-designed the engine. Ramondo then added that the new friends were very interested in the new car. Lucas was interested in these new friends, and their interest in the new car, as he mumbled and whispered with Ramondo.

"Silence!" Major Retono then shouted at them both, to which they immediately shut up. "I'm interested in this new car of yours. It's too late to look at it now, but I want you both to show me it in the morning. But above all, I want you both to remember not to ignore my authority in future. Is that clear?"

"Yes Major," Lucas and Ramondo replied simultaneously, before they

were excused.

The next morning, Major Retono went to take a brief look at the car, while Lucas and Ramondo were asleep. He was quietly pleased. However, he wanted a full working description of the car, before giving it his backing. He queried this with Professor Wagstaff, but though he noticed a second car, looking identical to the first, he wasn't aware of its seemingly-digital motor.

A little later, after Lucas and Ramondo had had their breakfasts, Major Retono took them to the car. He also invited Professor Wagstaff along to see things from his perspective, too.

"This car looks identical to the other car which was replicated," Major Retono said to the lads. "However, the controls look rather different. Can you explain this to me?"

"Well, basically, this is what humans would term a digital car," Ramondo explained. "Me and Lucas didn't feel comfortable with the other engine, which had to rely on hydro-carbon fuels."

"When the fuel-tank had run out of fuel, it would have to be filled up again," Lucas chipped-in. "Where were we then supposed to get the fuel from?"

"From a petrol station, maybe," commented Major Retono.

Lucas and Ramondo looked at each other, mystified.

"The fuel used in these cars is called petrol, and can be found in petrol stations," explained Professor Wagstaff. "You must have come across some, surely?"

"I don't know what a petrol station looks like," said Ramondo.

"To be honest, there don't appear to be many petrol stations around here, but we're straying away from the point," said Major Retono. "We've established that this is a digital car, so could you two explain how it runs?"

"The buttons on the steering wheel control the speed at which the car travels at," said Ramondo. "These are appropriately numbered to match the gears of the other car."

"The micro-chips beneath the buttons feed to a group of micro-chips on the wheels, via the axle," explained Lucas. "When you press button 1, it sends a message to the wheels to rotate in first gear, and so on."

"Something must produce the energy for the micro-chips in the first place?" queried Major Retono.

"That's the beauty of this car," said Lucas. "When you turn the ignition key, it sets the engine in motion, which gives enough energy to enrich the

micro-chips to send the appropriate messages through the car. As you press the accelerator pedal, I believe, pressure is pushed towards the axel chips, which generate more energy.”

“From there on,” explained Ramondo, “the greater the pressure, the more energy is fed into the micro-chips, and the faster the car can travel. And the faster the car moves, the more energy is fed into the wheel-chips.”

Major Retono and Professor Wagstaff looked at each other.

“This is only a proto-type, which we developed a few days ago,” said Lucas. “There may be occasions when more pressure needs to be used in a lower gear. We would like to give it a good run, before it’s destroyed.”

“Okay,” said the Major. “You can start by giving Professor Wagstaff and myself a trip in the car this morning.”

“Besides, Richard, the man I was with last night, wants to have a closer look at the car,” Ramondo added.

“Well you can take the first journey,” Major Retono said to him. “If you’re careful enough, I may have something for you.”

“Is there anywhere you’d like to go, sir?” Ramondo asked the Major.

“Not particularly,” Major Retono replied. “I’ll leave that decision to you.”

Ramondo’s first thoughts were to follow his course from the previous night, towards Dentdale. Along the journey, however, Major Retono told him to take the right hand exit at a small country junction. This wasn’t the route Ramondo had intended to go down. As Ramondo continued, the gradient became steeper and steeper. The car stuttered a few times, as Ramondo had to press hard on the accelerator and amend the gears.

As he drove on ever upwards, twisting and turning, Ramondo saw what seemed to be the railway line and then noticed a train station. He hoped this was the end of the gradient, but then noticed that the road continued over the railway line. Ramondo was becoming worried, but kept his nerve, as he believed the most important thing was to impress the Major.

The gradient soon eased again, and so Ramondo pressed button 3 on the steering wheel. As he was about to press button number 4, however, he could see the road was now heading downhill. As he twisted and turned a couple of times, he noticed the valley down below. Once again, he wasn’t too sure of himself but held his nerve, using the brake pedal to assist along the journey. He noticed the railway line again, and went over another bridge, before noticing another station, and the valley a lot nearer. Ramondo’s tension eased as he saw the main road ahead.

Major Retono ordered him to turn right. Ramondo stopped and looked left and right. After letting a large vehicle pass, he looked each way again,

and when he was sure there was no traffic on the main road, he turned right.

"I don't fancy going along that road again, do you?" Professor Wagstaff commented to Major Retono, who nodded his head but said nothing.

As Ramondo drove along this main road, he had to change gear a couple of times, but the gradients were nowhere near as bad as on the road they had just come off. He noticed signs suggesting they were heading for the village of Hawes, where signs from the Ribblehead road also pointed. It was here that the Major ordered Ramondo to follow the roads to Ribblehead cottage.

When they arrived back home, Major Retono took Ramondo and Lucas to the private room.

"Now, you may be wondering what I've called you in here for," Major Retono told them. "Well, don't worry at this moment, because I've already given you both a stern warning."

Lucas and Ramondo looked at each other, wondering what the Major was going to say next. Instead he handed them a small card. They each noticed a small photo of them on the card, but with the name of Raymond Retono on one and Alan Lucas on the other.

"What are these for?" Lucas asked.

"These are Driving Licenses," Major Retono explained. "I'm now satisfied that you are both suitable to drive cars on Earth. The Professor and I have been checking various rules and regulations in this world, or in this nation at least, and one of them is that you will require a license before you can drive. I should stress that these may be rescinded from you at any time, by me or by the national authorities."

"But there must have been some mistake," said Ramondo. "This isn't my name."

"It is from today," Major Retono instructed. "Though it is incorrect, you will be regarded as my son. If we are to continue our reconnaissance here, we must follow the laws, and blend in with the cultures, of this nation."

"Is this why I have two names?" queried Lucas.

"That is correct," Major Retono informed him. "You will also know me as Henry Retono. I will be calling a meeting later today to explain everything. This and several other points will all become clearer then."

That afternoon, Major Retono called everyone into one room. Doors were locked and mobiles were switched off. He explained that on Earth, as on the Interstellar Pilgrim, there were rules to be obeyed, and after giving a rough outline of the rules and regulations concerned, he presented

everyone with various documents.

"I have a document named a Birth Certificate," said Madaly. "This implies that I was born in the city of Birmingham on March 5th 1981. That's not strictly correct?"

"No. it is not strictly correct, but we must amalgamate with the people from this nation," said Major Retono. "In fact, this is as good a nation to amalgamate as any on Earth. There are many different people and cultures. We should have no problem mingling with the people, as we look and sound the same. However, we must not let ourselves be fooled into believing we will be accepted if we inform authorities that we are from another world. Therefore, these plans have been put into place."

Major Retono then elaborated on some of the issues, so as they could all fully understand the purpose of the documents. After some further queries, everyone accepted that this was necessary, and would follow the instructions from this day on.

A New Beginning

It was a new beginning for Major Retono and his reconnaissance team. They were now citizens of the United Kingdom, and were on the electoral role. Each of them now had two names, a first name and a surname, and carried various licences and certificates. Further plans were afoot to develop some of their relationships, too; plans which would be developed in the United Kingdom.

All the time, Major Retono, or Henry Retono as he now preferred to be known as, maintained close contact with the Interstellar Pilgrim. All the plans had been discussed with Commander Ondichi, who had agreed and authorised them. However, it became more and more obvious that Henry Retono and his team now had to live their own lives, and pave the way for residents of the Interstellar Pilgrim to start a new life on Earth.

Henry Retono had become rather impressed with the digital car, particularly when he compared it to the other Primera and all petrol-based vehicles which went up and down the valley each day. He and Professor Wagstaff felt that this was the perfect green vehicle which the Earth was looking for, that could turn the corner in the all-target-but-no-substance battle against global warming. First of all however, the idea had to be sold to the people of Earth.

Henry and Professor Arthur Wagstaff saw a perfect opportunity ahead of

them. On Sunday, Richard Copeland, who was one of the pot-holers who had saved Zebrina the previous weekend, was coming to visit Ramondo Retono, as he preferred to be known (this was agreed as he had already identified himself by that name to Richard Copeland). Unbeknown to them, Richard would bring along his father, Peter Copeland, who was working for the Ministry of Defence.

Ramondo introduced his colleague, now known as Alan Lucas, before taking them for a trip in their car. Peter requested to sit in the front, as he was determined to see the controls for himself, after all the fuss Richard had been making about it during the week. All along he thought the idea of a digital car was too good to be true, and that there must be a catch somewhere along the line.

To Peter's surprise however, he found that the car was everything Richard had said about it. The drive down the valley to Settle seemed as good as if it were in a regular 1.8 Primera, smooth, comfortable and quiet.

Peter then asked Ramondo to pull over, so that he could look at the engine himself. All appeared to be okay, though some items beneath the bonnet were effectively redundant.

"How long have you had this car?" Peter then asked.

"Only a few weeks," replied Ramondo. "We haven't really used this on many different terrains. We think it should be as fast as a normal car."

"You haven't yet tried this on the motorway?" Peter queried, to which Ramondo acknowledged. "We're not far from the A65. We can follow that road to the M6. You can try the car there, see how fast it can go. "

As Ramondo didn't know the area too well, he let Peter direct him. When they got to the motorway, Ramondo didn't drive too fast, up to 50 miles per hour, as he had never been on a motorway before. As he saw other cars wiz by however, he began to press button 5 on the steering wheel harder, which increased the speed.

Ramondo didn't feel too comfortable at first, and only looked ahead. As the others talked to him, he took little notice at first and was concerned at controlling the car. As he became used to the driving, Ramondo began to ease a little. Eventually, they turned off the motorway at the next exit, afterwhich Peter again directed them back to Ribblehead cottage.

Ramondo and Alan Lucas introduced Peter and Richard to the others when they arrived. After a brief conversation, Peter said he was impressed with the car and would speak to a mechanic about it and ask him to look at it, before he and Richard left.

In the meantime, far away in the USA, it was also a new beginning for Frank Marshall, former Professor at NASA. He was now preparing to move to a new house, away from the hustle of the city.

At 6.30 am, one Thursday morning in October, he closed the front door to his old house on the outskirts of Houston, before locking it. He then waved farewell to the property in which he and his wife Jeanette had spent the past twelve years, and had seen their children grow up in.

Frank was taking some of the possessions with him, which were already stored in the removal lorry outside the house. In the lorry was his good friend Clint Williams, in whose house Jeanette was staying while the men sorted the removals.

After leaving, they headed off into Houston, to drop off the keys in the Estate Agents', before leaving the city. As they headed out and along the highway, they could see traffic building up on the other side of the carriageway, traffic which Frank was all too familiar with but would be part of no longer. They then shared driving responsibilities of the lorry, until by 10.00 am, he and Clint were becoming hungry, and so pulled into a service station.

"What does Jeanette think about moving?" Clint asked.

"Well, she wasn't too keen on moving to Colorado at first – she wanted to go to California," Frank explained. "I wasn't too keen on moving at all initially, so Colorado was really a compromise."

"This new house of yours," Clint queried. "I think I've driven past it a couple of times. It's smaller than the house you've just left behind?"

"Yes it is, but why would I want a mansion at my time of life?" Frank said to Clint. "If I wanted a 5 bedroom detached house with a 60 metre garden I could have stayed put. My children have gone now and my mother and father ain't around anymore."

"It's not far from Pikes Peak observatory, is it?" Clint queried.

"About seven miles away," said Frank. "That was one of things which persuaded me to look at Colorado, high country, clear skies at night. Why do you ask?"

"I've been to the observatory a few times myself," said Clint. "It's a pretty good view."

"You've become rather interested in astronomy, haven't you?" Frank said to him. "Perhaps I should have asked you to come to the annual International Astronomers Convention in July."

"What was the Convention like?" asked Clint.

"Oh I didn't go this year, what with retirement and all that," Frank told him

"I didn't fancy flying all the way to New Zealand, either. I didn't want to be responsible for causing more greenhouse gas in the atmosphere."

"Whichever flight you'd have taken to New Zealand would still have flown, whether you had boarded it or not," replied Clint.

"I suppose so, but I want to do my bit to help the environment," said Frank. "If enough people took the same view, flights would have to be cancelled by the operators."

"Or reduced in price," emphasised Clint. "Do I detect you becoming a little more environmental these days?"

"I've been leaning that way for a while now," said Frank. "I tended not to show my green side at NASA, because let's face it, NASA isn't really the greenest company in the world."

"I suppose you can't go protesting about environmental issues in a city like Houston, or anywhere else in Texas for that matter," commented Clint.

"Exactly," replied Frank. "You're more likely to find yourself heckled and jeered in Houston, because so many people rely on the oil business, directly or indirectly. Even those with green views wouldn't protest, in case they'd be sacked by their bosses."

"We may not witness icebergs melting, nor recognise an increase in temperature by the odd degree or two, but everyone noticed the effects of Katrina," said Clint.

"Oh I've noticed the effects before hurricane Katrina," replied Frank. "The hurricanes were getting stronger and stronger each year. It's just that it takes an incident of those proportions before people in seniority take note."

"I suppose the population of Houston must have increased after so many people were transported from New Orleans and the surrounding states," Clint speculated.

"Indeed, indeed," sighed Frank.

"That convention you were on about?" Clint then queried, in an effort to change the subject. "Do you think I'd have been okay there, or would I be out of my depths?"

"Not really," Frank told him. "Not everyone attending is a Professor or a rocket scientist. Many of them bring guests along, who may not be interested in astronomy. Besides, most professors are just ordinary people. Look at me."

Clint thought to himself for a moment.

"I'll tell you what, why don't you come with me to next year's convention?" Frank suggested to Clint.

“Oh I don’t know if I really want to fly all the way to New Zealand,” Clint replied.

“Oh you won’t have to go far to next year’s convention,” Frank told him. “You may not even have to fly – it’s being held in California.”

“Did anyone else go along from NASA last year?” Clint asked, as he became a little more interested.

“Steve,” Frank replied. “Apparently, he had a hand in naming the new moon.”

“I didn’t know the new moon had a name,” said Clint.

“Steve was telling everybody what a great job you and Corny did in diverting the asteroid into an orbital mode,” Frank told him. “No-one could decide what to call it, so someone suggested to offer one of the NASA crew the option of naming it.”

“What did they name the asteroid, or should I say the new moon?” Clint queried.

“Jenna, after Corny’s sister,” explained Frank.

“I remember Corny speaking to me about his sister,” said Clint, as it brought back a few memories of the mission.

“Do you ever hear from Corny?” Clint asked Frank. “How is he these days?”

“Apparently he’s okay,” replied Frank. “I haven’t actually spoken to him, but Steve keeps in touch with him.”

“How is Steve, by the way?” asked Clint. “Did he get your old job in the end?”

“No,” said Frank. “Apparently, they haven’t yet decided on my successor. The last I heard, NASA were holding second interviews. They’re certainly taking their time over this.”

“I can’t say I’m the best person to comment, but I’d have thought Steve would have been as good as anyone to fill your role,” said Clint. “I mean, he was your right hand man.”

“One of my right hand men,” Frank emphasised. “Mind you, I can’t help thinking he knew too much.”

“In what way?” asked Clint.

“I can’t really say right now,” Frank replied, before looking at his watch.

“Come on, I think we’d better get a move on.”

Along the way Clint couldn’t help but be inquisitive, and kept asking what it was Steve knew too much about. Frank was reluctant to say too much, but at the same time felt Clint should know about this.

“I want this to be kept between us, do you understand?” Frank said to

Clint, who by now was becoming more inquisitive. "Steve and I looked at the film of the asteroid from your shuttle destroyer. We both agreed that the asteroid seemed to be moving into orbit before the missile exploded on approach."

"Why do you think that is?" asked Clint. "Could it have been the Earth's gravity pulling it into orbit?"

"Possibly, though I doubt it, not from that distance," said Frank.

"What about the missile?" asked Clint. "Perhaps the force of the missile, or possibly the shuttle destroyer herself, helped deflect the asteroid."

"I doubt it, although we agreed there may have been a slight possibility that it was deflected by a combination of all three," said Frank.

"But you believe it may have been something more suspicious?" queried Clint.

"There was something strange about that asteroid," Frank replied. "The speed it first travelled at, the fact that it reduced speed on several occasions. It just doesn't add up."

"What about the shuttle's camera?" asked Clint. "Could it have moved away from the asteroid as I swung the 'shuttle around to avoid the explosion."

"The camera was mobile, and geared to maintain focus on the asteroid," explained Frank.

"I realise that, but I did take a sharp swing away from the asteroid," Clint replied. "Perhaps that may have dislodged the camera slightly."

"There was no sign of this on the monitor, though I can't rule that out," said Frank. "There was something suspicious about the asteroid. Can you remember precisely when the asteroid moved into orbit?"

"No I'm afraid I can't," said Clint. "I was too busy trying to maintain control of the shuttle as we swung around quickly at a tight angle. The only person who may have noticed something was Corny."

"Steve's asked him about that a few times," said Frank. "Apparently, he seems to think the asteroid's trajectory did change slightly before the missile exploded, but he can't be sure. He was more concerned and with strapping himself in while you swung the shuttle away from the asteroid."

"And getting away of course," added Clint.

"Of course," said Frank. "By the time Corny looked at the asteroid monitor again, he thinks it may have been on a slightly different trajectory, but by this time he wasn't really interested in the asteroid anymore."

"Didn't anyone at mission control notice the asteroid's movements?" asked Clint. "Surely someone at NASA must have been watching the monitor at

the time.”

“You’d have thought so,” said Frank. “I seem to recall slight drifting of the asteroid, but once the missile was fired, our screens were focused on the shuttle. We were more concerned with you and Corny getting away. Besides, the camera was focused at the asteroid and moved in whichever direction the asteroid moved in.”

“So you wouldn’t have really noticed anything,” said Clint.

“Until Steve and I looked at the pictures in slow motion,” said Frank.

“That’s when we noticed stars in the background moving.”

“And that’s how you determined that the asteroid had moved from it’s original trajectory,” Clint said presumptuously. “Did you report this to anyone?”

“We couldn’t,” Frank told him. “We only looked at the film the day after I was ordered to close the case on the asteroid. Oh, by the way, if anyone asks you about this, you never heard any of it from me.”

“Well, as it happens, someone from Defence asked me about the asteroid,” confessed Clint. “I said I couldn’t recall the asteroid changing course prior to the missile exploding.”

“Well I suggest you stick to that story, if anyone asks again,” replied Frank.

Frank and Clint soon changed the subject, on their long journey to Colorado. By midday, they had crossed the border into New Mexico, and stopped for lunch just outside El Paso. Clint then took to the wheel for the next part of the journey, which saw them change highways. They could see the land rising steadily, with mountains in the background, and were now directly on course for Colorado.

It wasn’t until almost seven o’clock that evening, however, that they finally arrived at Clint’s house, just outside Colorado Springs. Their wives came to greet them, as the sun went down.

“How would you both like a treat tonight?” Jeanette asked them.

Frank, Clint and his wife Mary looked at each other, a little uncertain.

“Would you all like to come for a meal tonight?” Jeanette asked. “It’ll be on me, as a reward for a long day’s slog behind the wheel.”

“Thanks for the offer, honey, but Clint and me are exhausted,” Frank said to her. “You don’t mind if we make it tomorrow?”

“If you’d prefer it tomorrow,” Jeanette replied. “I just thought you’d like a nice beefsteak, before all that shifting about tomorrow.”

“I’ll go and order a couple of pizza’s for delivery instead, or would you

rather have a Tex-Mex?" suggested Mary.

"Can you make it pizza, kitten, as we had a chilli and beef on the journey," replied Clint. "Oh, and could you get us a glass of wine, please."

Frank and Clint were just happy to sit down and rest themselves. It had been a long day, and with the midday sun shining on them for much of it. They had become rather de-hydrated and exhausted, and soon fell asleep. They had to be awoken a couple of times after the pizza delivery had arrived, and didn't manage to finish their portions, before falling asleep again.

Frank and Clint had another heavy schedule ahead of them the following day, transporting the furniture to from Clint's house to Frank's newly-acquired house high in the hills. To make things easier, Clint, who kept in contact with friends from the US Air Academy nearby, had arranged for a couple of men to come and help with the task-in-hand.

It was hard work moving the furniture and possessions, though not as dehydrating as the previous day's journey from Texas. They were now in the Rockies, where the mountains ensured a fresher atmosphere. By mid afternoon, everything had been unloaded, and after a cup of coffee, they sorted and moved everything around. Jeanette then took them back into town that evening for the meal she had promised the previous day.

"It's rather fresh, don't you think?" Jeanette said to Frank, after they had waved goodbye to Clint and Mary in the restaurant car park that night. "I wasn't expecting it to be like this at night."

"It is a bit fresh, but I shouldn't worry," said Frank. "At least it isn't as stifling as it was back at Houston, even at this time of year."

"You may have thick skin, but I feel the cold more," Jeanette replied.

"We're in the mountains now, it's bound to be fresh at night," said Frank.

"It also gets fresh at night by the coast, even in California or Florida."

"Not as fresh as this," insisted Jeanette.

"Oh, I think you've forgotten what it can be like," Frank said to her.

"Anyway, at least we're in no danger of any hurricanes here."

"What have hurricanes got to do with this?" Jeanette asked as she and Frank got into their Dodge 4 by 4 motor.

"Hurricanes are an annual event in Florida, and the way this world's heading at the moment, the hurricane season is likely to spread over larger areas," Frank emphasised to her. "You saw what happened to New Orleans. One day, a hurricane like that will sweep parts of Houston."

"You won't get hurricanes in California," Jeanette replied.

"I know, and you won't get a hurricane season in Colorado, either," said Frank. "We'd have been twice as far from our families if we'd have moved to California."

"But that's not the point," Jeanette responded. "Besides, living twice as far from our families today doesn't really matter anymore. We can speak to them by phone or mobile, or write to them on the internet."

"And no doubt we will maintain close contact with our families," said Frank. "If we wanted to visit them though, it's bad enough driving between here and Houston, let alone from California."

"You won't get me driving to Houston. Or Dallas," replied Jeanette. "It would be much easier to fly, and not too expensive either."

"Don't start that, honey, you know how I feel about flying right now," Frank said to her. "Let's just look forward for now. We've got the rest of our lives ahead of us. You've only just turned 50 and I'm 52. I could still stand for president in ten years time. We could go cruising around the world."

"I suppose you're right," Jeanette sighed.

"Of course I am, honey," said Frank. "Let's settle down here first, and if things could be better, we've still got plenty of time to go somewhere else later. And if you're feeling cold at night, I'll always be around to snuggle up with."

That cheered Jeanette up, not that she was upset, but it took a while before she became used to the fresh air at night. She and Frank settled down to their new lives over the next few months, though it was not until the following Spring brought warmer weather that Jeanette fully acclimatised.

Frank, meanwhile, was enjoying every minute of being free of NASA, but still went regularly to the Pikes Peak observatory to see the universe. Sometimes he took Jeanette, and often went with Clint, where the two of them focused most attention on the new moon, Jenna. Not the most obvious object in the universe, you may think, but one in which Frank and Clint had been absorbed by over the past 12 months.

As Frank and Clint looked closely at Jenna, they noticed some spots of light. They noticed that these occurred at the same positions on each cycle of the new moon, and wondered what they could be. Perhaps they were bright spots reflected by the sun's light. Or could they be something else altogether?

Clint emailed NASA to notify them of their observations, to which he received a brief reply thanking him for the information and that it would be investigated 'in due course'.

Back in the United Kingdom, meanwhile, Henry, formerly Major, Retono was becoming a bit of a businessman. He had made agreements with three local scrap yards, near Kendal, Richmond and Skipton, where he picked-up written-off vehicles. From there, his team replicated the original vehicle designs to similar digital models, afterwhich Henry sold them. This earned him and his team a good living, but he was frustrated that the digital models didn't catch on in the way he had hoped.

Even with the help and advice of Peter and Richard Copeland, things had hardly got off the ground. Though Henry was selling the digital vehicles, no-one ever came back to complain about them, and those that did return only came to praise their purchases. It just needed stronger backing.

It was at this point when Professor Wagstaff noticed a vacancy for an Astronomer with the European Space Agency on the internet. It sounded rather exciting, and would be located in the Canary Islands, which was a big plus to the Professor. He spoke to Henry about this, who agreed that though the Professor was a special member of his team, he wouldn't stop in his way.

Shortly before Christmas 2007, Professor Wagstaff received an invitation to attend an interview for the position, entitled Professor of Planetary Studies. The interview was in Paris in early 2008. The Professor was rather excited at this, and felt well-suited to the position, as he had been studying planets for many, many years. Not your average Mars or Neptune, mind you, but planets in other solar systems, far, far away.

As the interview drew closer, Professor Wagstaff considered how to perform at the interview. He had never sat in on such an interview on Earth before. He knew about many planets, including a few where members of the Interstellar Pilgrim had originated. He couldn't afford to indicate this at the interview, otherwise he may be laughed off the Earth at claiming to be from another world. Or worse still, he may be victimised, locked up or murdered. This would probably jeopardise Henry's team, so Professor Wagstaff agreed to avoid stating where he had come from, and put together a more feasible alternative. It was a good job too.

Professor Wagstaff searched maps of Paris on the internet, and together with the directions provided to him, had little difficulty finding out precisely where he was to report to. He had learnt to speak French, too, so he could ask for help when he arrived in Paris. Professor Wagstaff was all ready for the interview, combing his hair (or what little he had left of it!) and gargling some mouthwash before was called in.

"Hello," a tall man said to him in a Dutch accent before shaking his hand as he walked into the office. "You must be Professor Wagstaff. 'Pleased to meet you. My name is Rob van Hennigem."

Professor Wagstaff smiled, said hello and shook his hand.

"I am the Director of Development for the European Space Agency," he said to Professor Wagstaff, as he took him to his seat and to two other members of the interviewing panel. "These are my colleagues, Francois le Rocheteaux, Managing Director, and Dermot O'Hagan, our new Director of Development."

Professor Wagstaff shook their hands to before sitting down.

"Professor Wagstaff, can you tell us a little about yourself, as nobody within the European Space Agency had ever heard of you before," asked Rob van Hennigem.

"Well, I studied at Bedfordshire Medical College, which is now defunct," explained Professor Wagstaff. "When I was there, all records were on paper and kept in files. The college was burned in 1986, after I had left, so you may not have been able to get hold of my records."

"And where have you been since then?" asked Rob van Hennigem.

"After I completed my medical degree in 1982, I decided to go abroad, due to problems with the doctors and nurses in the NHS," said Professor Wagstaff. "I first went to help the poor and starving people of Ethiopia, before Bob Geldof came along. After aid began to arrive I continued my assistance as best I could, before moving to neighbouring Sudan."

"And what did you do there?" asked Rob van Hennigem.

"I was always interested in Astronomy, and in Africa I saw a lot more of the night sky than in European cities," Professor Wagstaff explained. "I took up a position as Lecturer of Astronomy at Khartoum University, and from there became a professor."

"And what made you leave Sudan?" asked Rob van Hennigem.

"I did not like the current regime," replied Professor Wagstaff. "I took part in demonstrations, after which I became persecuted, so moved on to help the people of the west of the country. Following recent events, I decided to leave altogether, and have been staying with a friend in Yorkshire."

Professor Wagstaff smiled at the panel, with all 'the force' of Luke Skywalker and Ben Kenobe, though without giving any instructions. The three members of the panel simply continued the interview, unaware that they had been 'mentally instructed' to appoint Professor Wagstaff, as they asked about his views of the cosmos, and particularly planets.

"I know there are other planets out there which hold life," he stated to the

panel, before realising what he had said.

"You sound very certain about that," Dermot O'Hagan queried.

"I am convinced there are many similar planets in our galaxy, located in Earth-like positions," replied Professor Wagstaff. "As to whether they hold life, and what forms of life they may hold, is another matter."

"If you are certain of this, would you know where to look for such planets?" asked Dermot.

"I believe they are everywhere in the galaxy," replied Professor Wagstaff.

"My main aim is to develop a technique which can detect such planets."

"Do you believe we can develop space probes which can travel to such distant locations?" asked Rob van Hennigem.

"I believe we will do so one day," said Professor Wagstaff. "It may not be for a hundred years, or a thousand years even, but space travel will be conquered."

"Do you have any ideas how this may be done?" asked Francois le Rocheteaux.

"I believe it will be possible to create nuclear fusion, and develop crafts which operate under similar techniques to the sun," Professor Wagstaff replied. "We must first recognise how we can recycle waste products, particularly carbon dioxide and methane. Humans can split atoms, so we must develop a safe way in which to split carbon from oxygen, and from hydrogen. Oxygen can be recycled as air we breathe, and carbon can be recycled into many forms."

"And how about hydrogen?" asked Francois le Rocheteaux.

"That's where nuclear fusion comes in," said Professor Wagstaff. "If we can fuse the recycled hydrogen to become helium, in the same way as the stars, we can create super energy for space travel. We may be able to travel at light speed."

"Do you have any ideas how we can create safe nuclear fusion?" asked Dermot.

"I believe there are ways, which I am not prepared to divulge at this present moment," replied Professor Wagstaff. "We have the technology to do many things – we just require the leaders of the world to listen to us, before they end up destroying the planet."

"We all echo your sentiments," Francois le Rocheteaux said to him, as the other two members of the panel nodded in agreement.

"Only a few months ago, some friends of mine developed a digital car," said Professor Wagstaff. "In fact I have one myself. It's every bit as good as a normal petrol car, but doesn't produce pollutants."

“Do you have it with you at this moment?” asked Dermot.

“I didn’t take it with me, if that’s what you mean,” the Professor queried. “I came on the Eurostar from Leeds. One of them runs each day.”

The three members of the interviewing panel were very pleased with Professor Wagstaff, so much so that his history, or rather lack of verifiable history, seemed to be forgotten. They were particularly impressed with his positive visions and ideas, so much so that they may have appointed him to the position even without ‘the force’.

Back in England, Henry Retono and the others were becoming rather frustrated at the lack of recognition of the digital car. It had so many benefits, he wondered how such an invention could be ignored. Professor Wagstaff had earlier written to a Chinese motor manufacturer, as he could decipher Chinese. A reply was later received, in Chinese, but by this time Professor Wagstaff was no longer there. Henry had to go back to square one, and write to the Chinese motor manufacturer himself, this time in English.

Peter Copeland had also emailed managers at both Nissan in Sunderland and Toyota in Swindon, but received no reply from either plant. Peter then wrote to the respective plants. While they waited for a reply, he explained to Henry that things take time in the United Kingdom, and emphasised how long it took Wembley and the Millennium Dome to be constructed. Richard then suggested writing to Jeremy Clarkson from the TV programme Top Gear. To everyone’s surprise, they received a letter indicating that they would consider looking at the digital cars in a green edition at the end of the series. This wasn’t until the end of that year, 2008.

Henry Retono decided that it may be best not to wait for big business to come to him, but to develop a motor manufacturing company of his own instead. It wouldn’t take a lot to produce a new vehicle with a replicator, which by now he and his team had a dozen of. What was required was a totally new car design.

With the help of Ramondo, Alan, who requested to be known as Lucas, and the rest of his team, they settled on a new design. Henry had made deals with several scrap yards, bought a group of four lorries in which to carry written-off vehicles, and was about to purchase a large, old building in Skipton that looked like something from the industrial revolution, in which to use as a manufacturing base. Then he received a letter from the DVLA, ordering that no further digital vehicles be produced until they had been fully examined, tested and authorised to be driven on the roads of the

United Kingdom. Though this seemed a setback at first, as plans had to be put on hold, Henry realised that perhaps this was an opportunity to advertise the digital vehicles.

The Vanishing Moon

Professor Wagstaff seemed to fit the bill of an old English boffin perfectly, a short man with white hair surrounding a large, balding forehead and with an eccentric English accent to match. He could also speak Spanish, which came in very useful as he was now stationed on the island of La Palma, which was not too far from Lanzarote, where he wanted to settle all along.

To underline his earlier claim, he brought his digital car along with him. He found the car very good at climbing the gradients of the volcanic island of La Palma, and on the neighbouring island of Tenerife, where another high observatory was situated.

He knew where there were Earth-like planets in the galaxy, which had supported life. Indeed, he had been on a few of them himself. He had to find a way in which to detect small planets close to their stars, in order to prove that they existed. He considered a few different techniques, but in the end, he simply focused on certain stars. He magnified their images many times over on a daily basis. He knew that while in front of the star, the planets would be 'smothered' by the star's luminosity. He considered, however, that the light would be bright enough to reflect tiny images when the small planets were close to the side of the stars. He then waited for a tiny blob to appear to the side of the star.

Sure enough, the technique worked. At first, scientists at NASA tried to disprove Professor Wagstaff's theory. After the technique was tried on a few more stars, however, each instant resulted in the detection of one or more small blobs beside the star examined. The technique was successfully tried by Russian, Chinese, and Japanese astronomers, until it was eventually accepted internationally that these were planets. Professor Wagstaff had suddenly become famous.

Unfortunately, Professor Wagstaff couldn't realistically maintain contact with the Interstellar Pilgrim, otherwise his identity could be blown. He did, however, speak regularly to Henry Retono, who passed on information on Mars and the stars from Professor Schmidt indirectly. One day in May, Henry rang with some good news.

"I've just received official clearance from the DVLA that my cars are roadworthy and can be driven, and sold, legally," he told Professor Wagstaff.

"That's excellent news," the professor replied. "I suppose you can go ahead with your original plans to produce new vehicles?"

"I may have to amend them a little," Henry informed the Professor.

"There's been unrest on the Interstellar Pilgrim,"

"Why ever might that be?" Professor Wagstaff queried.

"Major Kong wanted to invade Earth," said Henry. "Apparently he'd been trying to get support for a few months, but fortunately he didn't get much. Not even many of the apes were in favour of his idea. As soon as the Commander heard about it he had Kong locked away."

"Perhaps he should have sent him down here," the professor commented.

"Perhaps he could have gone to Iraq!"

"The Commander's let him out now," said Henry. "He talked Kong out of the silly idea, told him Earth was a dangerous place and that they didn't have enough ammunition to invade Earth."

"We have the technology to go invading other worlds, but we are not aggressive, violent people, and will only use our weapons to defend ourselves," said Professor Wagstaff. "Kong comes from a different ancestry."

"That's the problem," replied Henry. "He's okay when the 'Pilgrim is cruising through the cosmos, but whenever we approach a planet with life he assumes we're going to invade."

"Remember when NASA sent that craft to destroy the 'Pilgrim?" queried Professor Wagstaff. "You've seen what's happening on some parts of the planet. Earth isn't a planet I'd want to invade."

"The thing is, the council have agreed that Earth isn't the right planet for them," Henry told him. "Professor Schmidt has also been telling everyone that they will live longer lives travelling through space at near-light speed."

"Well I can't speak for the people of the 'Pilgrim, but I certainly prefer to live a life in the open air and with natural heat and light – not cooped up in a hollow asteroid with artificial ventilation."

"Not everyone is as wise as us, Professor," said Henry. "I don't think anyone can fully appreciate natural life until they've experienced it."

"Is anyone coming down to Earth to help launch your car production?" asked Professor Wagstaff.

"The families of my team were going to stay here on Earth, but that's been rescinded," said Henry. "They should be departing in the next few

days. I'll give them your regards."

"Yes, please do," said the Professor. "I'd better get back to my studies. I'll keep an eye out for the 'Pilgrim's departure. Goodbye for now."

Professor Wagstaff kept a close watch on the new moon, Jenna, alias the Interstellar Pilgrim. His main task, however, was to prove that the planets discovered could support life. This was going to be much, much harder. Professor Wagstaff considered informing everyone of what he knew, but the consequences would be either admitting to being an alien, or else the world would think he was mad, so he said nothing.

One evening he noticed the 'Pilgrim was no longer orbiting Earth, but decided not to report anything. With the Interstellar Pilgrim now gone, he couldn't afford to tell his employers of his true identity. There was now nowhere for him to escape to. However, Professor Wagstaff was happy in his new role. Besides, he knew someone else would uncover the fact that the new moon was no longer there.

The European Space Agency were very pleased with the professor's work, and suggested he should go to the 2008 International Astronomers Convention, in California, to speak about his discoveries. He was quite happy to go along, until he realised that the disappearance of the new moon would be on the agenda. It was also suggested he should bring his digital car along with him.

Come July, Professor Wagstaff met Dermot O'Hagan, Director of Development, at Charles de Gaulle airport to catch a flight to Los Angeles. Once they had arrived, they spent a few nights chatting and celebrating the Professor's discoveries, before travelling to San Bernardino, in the Professor's car of course, where the 2008 convention was to be held.

After checking into a hotel on the morning of July 20th, Dermot took Professor Wagstaff to the conference centre where astronomers and scientists would meet. Then Dermot felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Well hello there," Dermot said in surprise as he turned around. "It's Professor Marshall! How are you doing these days?"

"Oh, I'm fine thanks," replied Frank. "I hear you're one of the directorate at the ESA these days."

"Yes, indeed," Dermot said to him. "I'm now Director of Development, overseeing our development of European Space Agency projects and resources. The position was vacated by Dr Ferguson, when he took up your old post at NASA."

“Let me introduce you to my good friend, Clint Williams,” said Frank. “He was one of the astronauts who saved the world last year.”

Dermot and Professor Wagstaff each greeted Clint and shook his hand, before Dermot introduced Professor Wagstaff.

“You’re the chap who discovered those small planets, aren’t you?” Frank said to him.

Professor Wagstaff just smiled and nodded his head in acknowledgement.

“Well I think congratulations are in order, don’t you?” said Frank. “There’s a bar just around the corner, so why don’t we go and have something to celebrate Professor Wagstaff’s discoveries. They do food there, too.”

“What do you say, Arthur?” Dermot said to Professor Wagstaff. “We could do with watering our loins, if you ask me.”

Professor Wagstaff was in agreement, so the four of them proceeded to the bar.

“To be quite honest, my discovery wasn’t really spectacular,” said Professor Wagstaff. “The technique was basically straight forward – I’m surprised no-one tried that earlier.”

“Oh you’re too modest, Arthur,” said Dermot.

“Actually, I think Professor Wagstaff has a point,” said Frank. “The thought did cross my mind a few times. In fact, I remember suggesting a similar technique to one of my scientists at NASA several years ago.”

“Did he take up your suggestion?” Professor Wagstaff asked Frank. “By the way, you can call me Arthur.”

“I think he may have tried it once without success, and before too much longer, he was offered a job elsewhere,” explained Frank.

“The man probably never knew where to search,” commented Professor Wagstaff.

“Do you mean you knew where to search for Earth-like planets?” Clint asked.

“Erhh,...not quite,” replied Professor Wagstaff realising what he’d said and about to back-track his comment.

“No, what Arthur means is the right sort of star to look for,” said Frank. “Something like our sun.”

“Yes exactly,” said Dermot. “It would be futile to observe Betelgeuse or Antares and expect to see a planet like Earth, as they’re so huge they will have extended beyond a suitable orbit.”

“How about some of the more-local stars?” queried Clint. “Can’t we observe planetary objects around any of them?”

“A lot of the closer stars, like Sirius, Alpha Centauri and Procyon, are

binaries,” Dermot said to Clint. “You know, where two stars, or indeed more in some cases, orbit each other. It seems that when binary stars are formed, something about them prevents small rocky planets from developing.”

“I recall suggesting something vaguely along those lines when we interviewed that guy’s successor, but it was overtaken by 9/11,” said Frank.

Professor Wagstaff didn’t know precisely what Frank was referring to, though he had heard and seen the events on TV. Perhaps that was for the better, as he may not have visited Earth otherwise. As the four of them approached the bar, Frank asked what the others wanted to drink. Dermot went to the bar with him to help with the drinks.

“So Frank, how’s retirement treating you?” he asked. “You certainly look all the better for it.”

“Oh I’m a lot fresher these days, though that’s partly due to living in the Colorado mountains,” Frank replied.

“I heard that you’d moved,” Dermot said to him. “What made you move there?”

“Basically, it was a compromise between my wife and myself,” said Frank. “She wanted to move to California, while I originally wanted to stay in Houston, or at least somewhere else in Texas. I think I got the better deal in the end.”

“Oh, why’s that?” asked Dermot.

“The location suits me, much better than Texas,” explained Frank. “There’s an observatory nearby, and if we want some ‘life’ we’re not too far from Colorado Springs. That’s where Clint’s from.”

Just then, a barman came along to ask for the order. Clint and Arthur meanwhile were talking at a table.

“Is this your first time here?” Arthur asked.

“Yes,” replied Clint. “I feel a bit out of place, to be honest.”

“Whatever’s that?” asked Arthur, who wasn’t used to all the fuss and hype, and was considering whether to testify who he really was and where he came from.

“Well, I’m no professor or rocket scientist,” said Clint. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m fascinated by the stars, but I think I’m out of my depths here.”

“Nonsense!” Arthur said to him, again considering whether he should ‘spill the beans’, before deciding to change the subject. “Tell me a little about that space mission of yours last year.”

“I was one half of the crew sent to save the Earth from an asteroid almost

as large as the one that finally killed-off the dinosaurs,” explained Clint.

“Were you sent to destroy the asteroid?” Arthur asked curiously.

“Our task was really to deflect the asteroid,” Clint emphasised. “It could be dangerous trying to destroy such an asteroid. It would have broken up into smaller fragments, which may have smashed into Earth individually.”

“Yes, quite,” said Arthur. “If you ask me, we have enough to combat in this world today, what with global warming. I don’t think your president is doing enough to help this planet.”

“No, not in that respect, I grant you, but we have other matters to deal with elsewhere in the world,” replied Clint.

“And much of that was started by your president, too,” Arthur commented, before Frank and Dermot came along with the drinks, and joined in the debate.

“While we’re talking about green issues, have you seen Arthur’s new car yet?” Dermot asked Frank and Clint.

“No, does it have reduced emissions?” Frank queried.

“Does it have reduced emissions, he says!” exclaimed Dermot. “This automobile has zero emissions – it requires no fuel at all, tell them Arthur.”

“It’s actually digitally-controlled,” said Arthur.

“Arthur’s brought it along with him,” Dermot told Frank and Clint, who were rather astounded. “I’m sure he won’t mind giving us all a ride in it later today sometime, would you Arthur?”

Professor Wagstaff nodded in acknowledgement, though was becoming a little tired of being ‘advertised’. The four of them discussed how the digital motor was the perfect solution for global warming, and soon forgot about the car as the debate covered several other solutions. Before long, they broadened their discussion, as they sat in the bar and drinking more pints. By 1.30 a waiter came to collect their lunch-plates, and by 2.00, they were still in discussion at their table. Professor Wagstaff thought they had forgotten about the digital car, until Clint turned the debate full-circle and brought it up again.

“Why don’t we have a ride in it now,” Dermot suggested. “It’s only a short walk away, in the car park of the Californian hotel.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Frank, before turning to Professor Wagstaff.

“Will you be okay to drive?”

“I should think so,” he replied. “I haven’t been drinking too much alcohol. I’ve a weak bladder, you see. Why don’t the three of you stay here while I go and pick up my car - I won’t be long.”

It wasn’t long before Professor Wagstaff arrived in his digital car. Frank and Clint seemed quite impressed, but preferred to ‘check it out’ before giving it their full approval. Frank went to sit in the front to help with directions. Professor Wagstaff was pleased at first, until he was directed onto the local highway.

“Now we can see how fast this thing goes,” Frank said to the others.

“Are you sure we’ll be alright on this road?” Professor Wagstaff queried.

“Perhaps we can come off at the next exit.”

“I shouldn’t worry too much about driving,” Frank reassured him. “You won’t have to worry about any traffic coming our way.”

“He’s right, Arthur,” Dermot said to him. “You’ve driven on motorways in the UK and Europe.”

“Why don’t we come off at the next exit?” Professor Wagstaff suggested again. “How far is the next exit, by the way? We can then stop somewhere and take a look at the car, what do you say?”

Clint looked at the US road atlas stored at the back of the car.

“15 miles,” he told Professor Wagstaff.

“That’s fine,” said Frank. “It’ll be a good distance to show how the car performs, and to judge the car.”

Professor Wagstaff agreed, not that he could do much else of course. However, his fears soon receded. As Frank, Clint and Dermot discussed the disappearance of the new moon, Professor Wagstaff carefully avoided the discussion, before trying to change the subject.

“Is anyone coming here from NASA?” he asked.

“I think my old buddy, Dr Steve di Pierri, is due to come along,” replied Frank.

“He was coming, don’t you mean?” Dermot chipped in, as Frank turned around to look at him, a little puzzled. “Haven’t you heard? His car was blown-up last month.”

“What!” shrieked Frank, his eyes almost popping out with amazement, as he turned to Clint. “I don’t remember hearing anything about this – do you?”

Clint was as amazed as Frank and said he couldn't recall hearing anything about any car bombs in the US, either.

"Well I'll be damned," commented Dermot. "Perhaps it was because you're living in a different state now."

"No, I'm sure we should have heard something of that magnitude on the US national news, don't you?" Clint said to Frank.

"Is Steve dead?" Frank asked Dermot.

"Oh no he managed to survive," Dermot told him. "Apparently, the car exploded when he pressed his fob to unlock the car door. Fortunately he was about six metres away when it happened."

"Did you say this happened last month?" Frank asked Dermot.

"Sometime last month, I don't know the precise day," replied Dermot. "I only know second-hand. If you want to know more, the best person to speak to would be Dr Ferguson. He'll be representing NASA at the convention."

Frank thought to himself for a moment. Perhaps he was worrying for nothing, and becoming carried away with fear. However, he didn't really know Dr Ferguson that well, and wasn't sure whether he was the right person to query this issue with.

"Who told you about Steve?" Clint then asked Dermot.

"Robbie Langham, I believe," said Dermot.

"Do you mean Robert Langman?" queried Frank.

"Probably," Dermot replied. "I don't know the chap personally, you understand. I only heard about this over a couple of phone calls with the chap."

Clint could see Frank was apprehensive, and had a fair idea what was concerning him. When he saw a sign coming up, he noticed it was for a serviceway, so suggested to turn into it a mile ahead. To change the subject again, he began to discuss the car with Professor Wagstaff. He, too, was happy to change the subject on this occasion.

After Professor Wagstaff found a place to park at the serviceway, he and Dermot went to buy some coffees and cakes, while Clint and Frank found a table to sit at.

"I don't like it," said Frank. "I don't like it one bit! Steve's car is destroyed a month after the new moon went missing. I'll bet someone had it rigged, after he tried to get the case about Jenna re-opened."

"Who'd want to do that though?" Clint asked him.

"The state probably," replied Frank. "The Military perhaps? I wouldn't put

it past the President, particularly this one. Someone in authority arranged it all."

"Sssshhhh!" Clint told him. "You can't go saying things like that. We don't even know the full story."

"You heard what Dermot said," Frank replied.

"Yes, and he said he only heard that second-hand," Clint advised him.

"That means you heard it third-hand. Anything could have been misinterpreted along the way."

"What do you suggest we do?" asked Frank. "Wait for a suicide bomber to say hello? You're probably as much in this as I am."

"Yes, but let's take things a little more calmly," suggested Clint. "If we are being watched the last thing we want to do is arouse suspicion. Why don't I call Corny, 'see if he's been affected by this in any way.'"

Frank went to the gents, while Clint rang Cornelius' mobile. An answerphone came up, asking to leave a message, which he did. Clint had Cornelius' home telephone number so decided to ring him there. A young lady answered the phone.

"Hi there, can I speak to Corny please," Clint requested.

"Do you mean Major General Cornelius Smith?" the young lady queried.

"Yes please, if he's available?" replied Clint.

"I'm afraid Cornelius isn't here," the young lady replied. "He was sent to Afghanistan last month. He's gone to help the British in Helmand province."

"Have you spoken to him recently?" asked Clint, who himself was now becoming concerned.

"I received a letter from him last week, and I've spoken to staff at his military base," the young lady said. "He's okay, by the way."

"Can I ask who I'm speaking to?" Clint asked.

"I'm Cornelius' daughter, Jacquelinnda," she replied. "Can I leave a message for him?"

"It's not important, as long as Corny's okay," said Clint.

"Who shall I say rang?" she asked, to which Clint was unsure what to say.

"You're from that space mission of his last year, aren't you? Dad was always moaning about being called Corny."

"Just tell him Clint called, to wish him well. Goodbye for now," Clint then said in a hurry before hanging up, as Frank came along.

"Did you manage to speak to Corny?" he asked Clint.

"Not exactly," said Clint, as he saw Dermot and Arthur approaching. "I'll tell you when we get back."

Frank was unaware of Clint's call, and began to ask about the car.

Professor Wagstaff explained everything, and after they had finished their coffees went to show the others how it worked. Frank, Clint and Dermot weren't totally astounded, as they knew the digital revolution was well and truly here. It made sense that, as digital tools became smaller and more powerful, something like a car would eventually arrive on the scene. They were very impressed with the car. It was environment-friendly and probably economically viable. It could be the next big thing in world development.

The four of them then left the serviceway chatting pleasantly with each other. When they arrived back in San Bernadino, Frank and Clint went back to their hotel. Clint invited Frank to his room, and suggested to watch TV. It was then, while Frank was in a good mood, that Clint dropped the bombshell that Cornelius had been sent to Afghanistan. This time Frank became more worried than ever.

"You're telling me that Corny has been sent to the wildest, most dangerous region in one of the most dangerous countries in the world?" he queried with Clint, hoping he had misunderstood something along the way. "I'm afraid that's correct," Clint told him. "He was sent there last month, to help the British forces."

"Well, we've had it, you know that," Frank replied, throwing his arms in the air. "What do you suggest we do now?"

"I don't know, Frank, I don't know," said Clint. "We mustn't let this get to us – we don't want to make ourselves more obvious."

"With all due respects, this is a lot easier for you to handle," Frank replied. "You've fought in battles and flown in space, half-expecting never to return."

"Oh no, Frank, I never go out there thinking I may not return," replied Clint. "If I fight, I fight to win. Even in the shuttle last year, I always expected to return. I studied the shuttle's engines to see how close I could go and how fast I could turn her around."

"Only in theory," said Frank.

"Yes, but you've got to look at the theories in a positive frame of mind, or you'll never make it," Clint emphasised. "While we're still alive, we shouldn't expect someone to come and assassinate us."

Frank went quiet, but thought all-the-more.

"Corny is in the military – he's always likely to be sent somewhere in the world, whether it be for the US or on behalf of the UN," said Clint. "Have you had any reporters or journalists coming to visit you, to get your opinion on the vanishing moon?"

"No," replied Frank.

"Don't you think you'd have been the first person they'd have come to, in search of an answer?" Clint asked him. "You were the person who closed the case on the asteroid?"

"Under instructions from the Secretary for Defence," Frank emphasised.

"And if you were quizzed by a journalist about closing the case, would you tell them that it was under instructions from the Secretary for Defence?" asked Clint.

Frank stuttered a little as he stopped before saying what he felt like saying.

"You wouldn't, would you?" Clint said to him. "You'd know you had too much to lose if you implicated such a senior person. Besides, he'd deny any allegations and it would be his word against yours."

Frank thought to himself.

"The fact that journalists haven't come asking why you closed the case suggests to me that they have other matters to go after," said Clint.

"We're both retired now – nobody wants to know us."

"I hope you're right," Frank said to him. "It doesn't explain the disappearance of Jenna, does it? I've always been suspicious about that asteroid, satellite or whatever you want to call it. The case may have been closed with NASA, but that won't stop the Europeans or Russians examining the case."

"Well if Dermot or any Rusky wants to open the case with their space agency, that's not our responsibility," stated Clint. "And it ain't going to be Mr Luddolman's either."

"That's a point," said Frank. "Shall I speak to Dermot about this tomorrow, and ask him to re-open the case?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Clint suggested. "The European Space Agency probably never even closed the case. They probably had very little information on the matter, which may be why they intended to visit the asteroid."

"But we can't do nothing about this," said Frank.

"You've done your piece of work for this country, and so have I, several times over," Clint replied. "We deserved our retirements. We're now our own citizens, so let's give this a rest, once and for all."

Frank calmed down a little as he searched the TV stations again.

"Do you know what's cooking in the hotel tonight?" Clint asked him, to which Frank said he was unsure. "I'm going down to the restaurant to look at the menu."

Frank decided to switch the TV off and go with him. Clint was a little worried, for different reasons altogether, if the two of them were seen with each other in the hotel too often. They didn't argue the matter, however, in order to avoid the previous debate.

After they had pre-ordered their meals, they each went back to their rooms. While Frank had a bath, Clint invited Dermot and Professor Wagstaff to dine with them that evening, but they declined as they had already made arrangements by that time. As it happened, they bumped into Dermot and Professor Wagstaff later that night as they went out on the town, and ended up having a late night. Frank didn't raise his concerns, and with the help of several pints forgot all of them.

The next morning, Frank felt rather groggy, and remained in his bed, the door locked. He missed a couple of calls from Clint and Dermot, and even missed the hotel breakfast that morning. After going to the lavatory, he managed to wake himself up a little, so decided to take a shower. During this time, he heard the phone ring, but decided not to answer it. A little later, while he was getting dressed, he heard a knock on the door. It was Clint.

"Frank, Frank, are you okay in there?" he could hear him ask.

"Can you wait a minute, please," Frank replied, still yawning.

"Thank heaven you're okay," said a relieved Clint. "I was beginning to wonder if something had happened to you."

"I'm okay," said Frank as he zipped his trousers before going to the door.

"I'm just a little worse for wears after last night. I haven't been out for a drink like that in years, since..., since...."

"Since the last convention?" queried Clint. "Do you know what time it is?"

Frank looked at the clock in his room. It said 10.05 am. He realised that he had missed the hotel breakfast.

"This year's convention starts today," Clint told him. "Don't you think we should get a move-on?"

"Not just yet," replied Frank. "I've got to have something to eat yet. Do you know when the hotel bar opens? I'm sure they'll sell food there."

"Why don't you meet me downstairs in ten minutes," Clint suggested. "We can go to the café across the road."

While Clint was waiting in the hotel reception, Dermot rang his mobile to ask about Frank, as he had rung him a little earlier and had received no reply.

“He’s okay now,” Clint told him. “It was just a hangover from all the booze last night.”

“Oh I am pleased to hear that,” said Dermot. “I thought I’d check to see if he’s all right. He seemed a bit worried yesterday, probably about his old mate Steve getting blown-up.”

“How are you feeling today?” Clint asked Dermot. “I notice you had a few drinks as well last night.”

“Oh I’m fine,” said Dermot. “I’ve knocked back a dozen pints in one night before. It’s the Irish blood in me! Will Frank be going to the convention later today?”

“Oh he’ll be going,” said Clint. “He missed breakfast this morning so he’s going to a café to have something to eat in a little while. I’ll be going with him. You can come and join us if you like.”

“I’d like to,” replied Dermot, “but I’ve got a few calls to make, and a few things to clarify first. I must keep a check on matters at the European Space Agency.”

“Before you go, how is Arthur?” Clint asked. “He didn’t seem to drink a lot last night.”

“No, no, I think it’s from his time spent in Africa,” Dermot replied. “I wouldn’t want to guess what they drank over there, in some places at least. Anyway, I must go – see you at the Route 66 Bar, where we went yesterday. Would 11.45 be okay with you?”

“That’s fine,” said Clint. “See you later.”

Sure enough, Frank went for a bite to eat at the Route 66 Bar. Clint went with him. Then, about 45 minutes later, Dermot and Arthur met them there, and after a brief discussion, went to the conference hall just around the corner. In the hall, Dermot and Arthur helped themselves to some of the fruit, snacks and sandwiches on offer, before they all went to take their seats. They were talking to each other and to other people around them when the drum-roll began, and the curtains on stage were opened. Everyone was surprised when they saw none-other than the Governor of California announce the opening introduction.

“Hello and welcome, ladies & gentlemen, professors, doctors and rocket scientists. Welcome to the 2008 International Astronomers Convention,” he announced to the audience. “I’m sure you’re all wondering what I’m doing here. Well, ever since I was a young lad I have been fascinated by the stars. Having been one myself, and held the title of Mr Universe, this felt like a natural progression.”

The audience laughed. Even Professor Wagstaff was quite amused, and presumed that 'Mr Universe' was a celebrity from outer space. This made him feel a lot more relaxed, and wondering whether perhaps he should tell the audience where he originally came from.

"You all have a copy of the agenda, so without any further ado, I shall hand you to Dr Graham Ferguson, Professor-in-Chief at NASA," the Governor of California said to the audience, before introducing Dr Ferguson as they clapped him. The Governor of California then shook his hand before taking his seat at the front of the audience.

"Thank you very much, Governor, give him a round of applause," Dr Ferguson said to the audience. After the clapping had died down, he opened the first item on the agenda. "As you may know, a lot has happened in the past 12 months. Only last year we were debating the Earth's 'new moon', which I believe we named Jenna. That after my teams at NASA successfully deflected the Earth-bound asteroid."

At this point Frank became rather annoyed as he had led NASA at the time and oversaw the whole event. Clint too, was annoyed for similar reasons.

"And yet today it seems that Jenna has disappeared," said Dr Ferguson as he continued with the autocue. "I would first like to ask everyone if any of you were monitoring Jenna, and may have seen anything suspicious?"

There was no response from the audience, everyone was mystified. Everyone except for Professor Arthur Wagstaff, that is. He considered announcing to the audience what had happened, but decided this may not be the right moment.

"Does anyone in the audience have any idea of what may have happened?" Dr Ferguson then asked, to which a hand went up in the audience. It was Frank.

"The larger man towards the front with his hand up, what do you think may have happened?" Dr Ferguson asked.

"I'm Professor Frank Marshall, former Professor-in-Chief at NASA," he announced. "Has anyone considered whether Jenna was a space ship in disguise? Perhaps the aliens were monitoring Earth, but considered it unsuitable when bearing in mind everything that is going on in the world today?"

Many of the audience were surprised, and commented amongst themselves. Dr Ferguson was surprised too, but just laughed it all off as though it was a sarcastic joke.

"I don't think anyone here has considered your suggestion, Professor

Marshall, but I don't think we can rule that out for the time being," Dr Ferguson replied. "Tell me, where did you get the idea from?"

"Well, the asteroid had been traveling towards Earth at totally abnormal speeds to say the least," explained Frank. "It was only really noticed as it was in the Kuiper belt. Our records suggest that it was traveling at almost one million miles per hour. That isn't the speed your average asteroid travels at, is it?"

"No, no, I accept that," said Dr Ferguson. "What other mysterious events did you notice, Professor Marshall?"

"It's speed decreased on three or four further occasions," said Frank. "That suggests to me that the asteroid may have been traveling at even faster speeds beyond the Kuiper belt and outside our solar system."

"I take your points, Professor, but do you have any evidence?" asked Dr Ferguson. "We have, as yet, no evidence to suggest any theories."

"I accept that, but please note that this is nothing more than a suggestion," explained Frank. "This is certainly not a theory, and there is no evidence to back this up."

"Can I ask why you decided to close the case on Jenna?" Dr Ferguson queried.

"NASA had several other projects at the time, and the whole Jenna saga was a distraction," said Frank. "Perhaps you can tell us all how those projects are developing at the moment?"

Dr Ferguson was reluctant to answer this, but simply said that this would be raised on the 'Space Development' item of the agenda.

Professor Wagstaff was becoming rather interested. Perhaps someone on Earth knew about the Intestellar Pilgrim. However, no-one had come forward to him regarding Frank's suggestion, not even Frank himself, so thought it better to remain silent for the time being. Professor Wagstaff was also interested in seeing the former Mr Universe, and was thinking when it may be best to go over to meet him. Perhaps he was the right person to talk about this to.

In the meantime, some other astronomers suggested that Jenna had 'imploded' on itself, possibly due to the gravitational forces of Earth and the Moon. Another astronomer suggested that these forces tore the asteroid apart, into little boulders. It was argued, however, that if either event had occurred some remnants would have been left behind, however minor. It was clear that this item of the agenda was very puzzling and to which no-one had a plausible answer. Dr Ferguson then referred to the next item on the agenda, which was the progress made on the search for

planetary objects outside our solar system.

“For millennia, people have wondered whether we are the only life-bearing planet in the universe,” Dr Ferguson said to the audience. “In recent times, many of us have tried to search for other small planets which may hold life. Amongst the leading astronomers in this field is a new name to many of us here. He has identified several small planets elsewhere in our galaxy, each at seemingly suitable distances from the parent star, so as they may well hold life. Please give a warm welcome to Professor Arthur Wagstaff.”

Professor Wagstaff was surprised. The light now shone on him, and as he stood up he could hear the audience clapping him. Arthur then walked forward to the stage.

“Welcome, that was quite an achievement, finding small earth-like planets orbiting other stars,” Dr Ferguson said to Professor Wagstaff.

“Well, I believe that in order to find such planets, I first had to seek a star similar to our sun,” Professor Wagstaff explained. “The fact is that many of the stars we see are binary systems, or even groups of more stars, so this limited the option of stars to view.”

“And can you explain the technique you used?” Dr Ferguson asked.

“I magnified the images of individual stars many times over,” explained Professor Wagstaff. “Though planets may be ‘smothered’ by a star’s luminosity, I felt that the light from the star would be bright enough to reflect tiny images when the small planets were to the side of the stars.”

“And how could you tell that these planets were similar to Earth?” asked Dr Ferguson.

“I could determine the planet size by the magnification from the star concerned,” replied Professor Wagstaff. “By monitoring the star on a regular basis, I determined the orbit of the planet, and hence it’s distance from the star. I suppose it’s a little bit like Galileo discovering the major moons of Jupiter centuries ago.”

“Have you been able to determine whether the planets support life?” asked Dr Ferguson.

“Not yet, I’m afraid,” said Professor Wagstaff. “I have referred this to NASA, as you may be aware, with a view to the particular planets being monitored by the International Space Station and the Hubble Space Telescope. I’m now going to focus on some other projects.”

“Can you tell us any of the projects?” asked Dr Ferguson.

“Most of them are in relation to the battle against global warming. We at the European Space Agency take the issue very seriously, and believe it

prudent to give priority to our own planet,” Professor Wagstaff told him. At this point Professor Wagstaff sensed danger within the premises. He couldn’t determine what it was, but believed it may be directed to someone he knew.

“Can you tell us if you have any cosmic projects in mind?” Dr Ferguson asked while Professor Wagstaff was trying to assess the situation.

“There are a few which I would like to undertake one day, to confirm some theories of mine,” said Professor Wagstaff.

“Would you like to divulge some of those theories?” asked Dr Ferguson.

“I’m sure everyone would be interested to know of any ideas you may have.”

“Well, amongst them, I have my own theory on the Big Bang,” replied Professor Wagstaff, who wanted to get back to his seat.

“Can you elaborate on that theory?” asked Dr Ferguson.

“I believe that the Big Bang was caused by a super-mega black hole,” Professor Wagstaff told him. “I don’t believe in all this matter-annihilating-anti-matter mumbo-jumbo.”

The audience were surprised at this, and Dr Ferguson invited Professor Wagstaff to explain his views, much to the Professor’s displeasure.

“I’m sure you agree that at the centre of all galaxies lies a black hole,” Professor Wagstaff told Dr Ferguson. “Black holes have infinite gravity and will consume all matter around them, or stars which may stray too close. I accept that there are several black holes within each galaxy, but as they consume everything in their path, they will rotate to the centre of each galaxy, and will eventually form one massive black hole. Eventually, the black hole will consume the entire galaxy.”

The audience were all whispering to each other. This distracted Professor Wagstaff a little. Again he could sense danger, but just as he thought he recognised what it was, Dr Ferguson requested he explain his theory further.

“This will mean that there will be two or more super black holes consuming a local galactic group,” explained Professor Wagstaff. “These will merge into a super-mega black hole, with the strength to pull other LGGs towards it.”

“Could you explain what are LGGs?” asked Dr Ferguson.

“Local Galactic Groups, please keep up with me,” commented Professor Wagstaff. “This is what will eventually pull galaxies back towards an epicenter.”

“But if the galaxies are all consumed by black holes, shouldn’t everything

merge into one ultimate black hole, with no matter to create the Big Bang?" queried Dr Ferguson.

"Think of two magnets, pulling towards each other," Arthur then suggested. "Then think of another magnet approaching them, rotated at 180 degrees. It will repel the other magnets. Likewise, the forces of more than one black hole may not always pull together."

"And you believe this will eventually cause another Big Bang?" queried Dr Ferguson.

"We don't know enough about black holes, but I believe that the forces of several mega black holes will eventually tear each other apart," Professor Wagstaff explained. "Their energies will all be used pulling together, and the matter within too heavy to maintain. Eventually, this will cause an ultra-super-massive explosion, the Big Bang."

"Well that's certainly an interesting theory," said Dr Ferguson. "Controversial, but interesting. Do you have any evidence for this?"

"No, not directly, but nor did Copernicus or Galileo," replied Arthur. "People ignored Gene Shoemaker when he said that craters on the moon were created by meteorite collisions, believing they were extinct lunar volcanoes instead."

"It is widely acknowledged that the universe is not currently contracting, but expanding at a faster rate than first envisaged," emphasised Dr Ferguson. "Perhaps you would like to elaborate on the reasons behind your theories?"

"I acknowledge that the universe is expanding, but not at the rate currently perceived," said Arthur. "The furthest galaxies viewed are 14 billion light years away, hence we see them 14 billion years ago. This suggests that we see them traveling at speeds from 14 billion years ago."

Everyone in the audience was quiet and looked at each other.

"In galaxies, new stars are not being created at the same pace as old stars are dying," Arthur then added. "Most will end up as red or white dwarfs, while a few will become black holes, though others will be consumed by them. Only a few will end up as supernovae, becoming nebulae to create new stars."

"And you believe this will result in the universe contracting?" asked Dr Ferguson.

"Precisely," said Arthur. "It is already acknowledged by many that the universe will eventually fade. As galaxies move further away, energy from the Big Bang decreases. As fewer stars explode into supernovae, even less energy is created. Black holes, however, have limitless gravitational

forces, and as they increase, consume matter, merge and become larger and ever-more powerful, galaxies will slow down and, eventually, the universe will contract.”

Dr Ferguson was bemused as what to say next, and tried to refer to other astronomers in the audience, in the hope of finding support for current theories. The audience was transfixed with Arthur’s theories, as all was silent.

“I believe there has been more than one Big Bang, and that they may have occurred in different parts of the universe,” added Professor Wagstaff. “This is why galaxies are sometimes seen to be crossing paths. If there was just one explosion, everything would move in different directions, leaving nothing to move towards each other.”

“That’s certainly very interesting,” said Dr Ferguson, who unsure what to say next simply invited a big hand for Professor Wagstaff, before he excused him from the stage.

As Professor Wagstaff went back to his seat, he felt the sense of danger once again. He looked up towards the stanchions at the top of the conference hall, which was dimmed to give the feeling of outer space. He could sense a man with a rifle, pointing towards Professor Frank Marshall. Fortunately, the items raised by Arthur had created an air of whispers and discussion amongst astronomers, so the gunman couldn’t get a clear view of Frank.

When Arthur sat down, Dr Ferguson raised the next topic on the agenda, at which point the audience went quiet. Arthur felt the sense of danger increasing. He managed to catch a view of the gunman, who was slowly squeezing the trigger. Arthur focused his force on the gunman, who felt put-off by this, and struggled to concentrate on his target.

“You never told me about those ideas of yours, Arthur,” Dermot commented to him, before noticing all may not be well. “Are you okay Arthur?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” replied Arthur, as he lost his concentration.

At this point, the gunman had steadied his aim on his intended target, and so Arthur had to re-focus his efforts. It was now becoming a battle of wills, as the gunman’s concentration waned, until the audience gave a welcoming handclap to Dr Ferguson’s next guest to appear on stage. This distracted Arthur, and gave the gunman the upper hand again.

As the clapping died down, the gunman focused at Frank once more, while Professor Wagstaff stared up at the gunman. With all the force from

a star wars movie, he managed to distract the gunman enough to lose his balance, before toppling onto the stage.

Everyone was shocked. Dr Ferguson went to check on the gunmen, and the Governor of California ran onto the stage.

"Is he okay?" the Governor asked Dr Ferguson.

"He's not dead," Dr Ferguson replied as he felt the pulse of the gunman.

"Shall we call an ambulance?"

"Just keep a check on him for the moment," the Governor advised. "I'll call security – they can take this gunman to confinement somewhere in this centre."

The audience murmured to each other, wondering who the gunman had been aiming at, and who he may have been working for. Was this supposed to be an assassination attempt on the Governor of California? Was it an attempt on the Chief of NASA? Was it some crazy gunman with something against someone in the audience?

The audience couldn't get a good view of the gunman, and pondered whether it may have been an Islamic militant? Only two men really knew the answer, and perhaps another man may have had a good idea who the target was. Frank, Clint and Arthur, each said nothing.

As security guards took the gunman away, the Governor of California stood up.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, can I have your attention please?" he asked to the audience. "I will ask you all to remain seated for the time being, while security guards check the premises. I will keep you informed and confirm when it is safe to leave the building."

Everyone remained seated, but the rumours began to circulate amongst the audience. Frank and Clint remained tight-lipped about their suspicions, though it didn't stop them from debating the main rumours with their colleagues. Professor Wagstaff also said nothing about what had really happened. Eventually, security guards went to speak to the Governor', who coughed to draw everyone's attention.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I have been assured that the premises are safe and secured," he told the audience. "I'd like to thank everyone for attending today's convention, but due to unforeseen circumstances, the rest of today's agenda will have to be abandoned. I envisage that the convention will resume tomorrow morning, and will ensure that you are all kept informed of events. Notices will be placed at the convention centre to confirm arrangements."

"Will we be called to give evidence on today's events?" a man in the

audience asked the Governor’.

“I cannot say with great certainty at this moment, but suggest this should not be ruled out,” the Governor’ replied. “Once again, I’d like to thank everyone for attending today’s convention. I’d like to wish you all a safe journey to your accomodation, and a happy day ahead. Thank you.”

At that point everyone began to leave. It was noticed Frank sometimes looked behind him, in case someone was watching him.

“Are you okay Frank?” asked Dermot.

“I’m fine,” Frank replied. “Just a little concerned, that’s all.”

“You don’t think the guy was going to shoot you, do you?” queried Dermot.

“I think it may be the shock,” Clint said quickly, fearing Frank would tell all his fears, how he was forced to retire, and his suspicions of what may have happened to Steve Di Pierri and Major-General Cornelius Smith.

“Shall we go somewhere for a drink and snack?” he suggested.

“What like the café around the corner?” queried Dermot.

“No, I was thinking somewhere out of town,” suggested Clint. “Why don’t you all come in my car?”

“That sounds good to me,” said Arthur, who also noticed that Frank was worried, and felt it better to get away somewhere in case Frank ‘spilled the beans’.

“Where did you get those ideas of yours, Arthur,” Dermot said to him.

“They seemed very controversial.”

“Yeah, you certainly caught Dr Ferguson by surprise,” commented Clint.

“Never mind catching Dr Ferguson by surprise,” said Dermot. “You certainly gave me a shock, Arthur.”

“I accept my views may be controversial, but I happen to believe in them,” Arthur replied. “Are you saying you wouldn’t have selected me at my interview if I had raised those views?”

“No, no, I’m not saying that,” back-tracked Dermot. “I can’t speak for the other members of your interviewing panel, though.”

“But surely, we are all entitled to our own views and ideas, are we not?” Arthur insisted. “That’s the nice thing about Earth, or most parts of it anyway, where we can hold our personal opinions.”

“I know I’m no astronomer, but I find Arthur’s views of the Big Bang more acceptable than about matter and anti-matter annihilating each other in thousandths of a second,” Clint argued. “I’ve queried this with Frank several times, remain to be convinced, and still find it difficult to accept.”

At this point Frank mumbled something to let the others know he was still there, but his mind was on other things.

"The universe would never have expanded to it's current state if that didn't occur," replied Dermot in an effort to convince his colleagues.

"Yes, but that's only one theory," said Arthur. "If matter annihilated anti-matter, how come there is still anti-matter at all corners of the universe?"

"The anti-matter will have built up over trillions of years," argued Dermot.

"I'm not so sure about the equation myself, but I reckon matter annihilated something or we wouldn't have evolved to where we are today?"

"But what was annihilated?" queried Arthur.

"We don't know – it was annihilated trillions of years ago, whatever it was," replied Dermot.

"But that's just theory," argued Arthur. "It's no more certain than my own theories. Ptolemy was well-respected in his day but how many of his views have since been disproved?"

"He's got a point," chirped Frank.

While Arthur and Dermot were in debate, Clint took his keys out of his pocket as they approached his Chevrolet, and aimed his fob at the car to open the doors. As they got inside Clint's car, Dermot and Arthur said how impressed they were with it, though Arthur queried how fuel-efficient it was.

"It uses about a litre of gasoline every 25 to 30 miles," Clint told him. "I know that doesn't sound particularly economical, but it's pretty good over here in the US."

"Surely there are cars which give better miles-per-litre rates than that?" commented Arthur.

"There are, but I need a car like this because it's very hilly where I live, to say the least," said Clint. "It wouldn't be too easy getting up mountains to get to the local observatory, nor to visit Frank for that matter."

"There are vehicles in Europe of similar size, but are more economical than that," commented Arthur.

Sensing Professor Wagstaff was about to comment further on how un-environmental the car was, Dermot referred to Frank in an effort to change the subject.

"Hey, who do you think that gunman was trying to shoot in the conference centre today?" he asked.

That was the last thing on Clint's mind as he looked over his shoulder before pulling away when the road was clear.

"You don't suppose someone hired him to assassinate the Governor of California, do you?" asked Dermot.

Clint had by now ascertained what the new topic of conversation was, and

would have preferred to argue with Professor Wagstaff about his Chevrolet. He wanted to join in the discussion to try to deflect attention away from Frank, before he told the others about his retirement arrangements'. While he was driving though, Clint knew he couldn't afford to say too much.

"You know what," Frank said to Dermot. "I reckon the gunman was intending to shoot me."

"What?!" replied an astonished Dermot. "Why in God's name would anyone want to kill you?"

"There are a lot of things you don't know about," Frank replied, to which Dermot wanted to say something but was unsure of what to say.

"You don't have any murky secrets, or any skeletons in your cupboard, I hope?" Arthur said to Frank.

"If there's anything like that, we don't want to know, thank you," said Dermot.

"I have nothing like that to hide," Frank replied. "Certain secrets were 'forced' on me."

"Don't say anything, Frank," Clint said to him, at which point Dermot and Arthur turned their attention. "Don't look at me!?" Clint then told them, "I've got nothing to hide either."

Attention then turned back to Frank. He was unsure what to tell Dermot and Arthur. He knew he was sworn to secrecy, but at the same time could see that Dermot and Arthur were aware that Clint knew something. He had already broken his word, though nobody knew it. Frank couldn't be sure of this, however. Perhaps that was why the gunman had been sent to dispose of him?

Dermot and Arthur became rather baffled, and a little worried. Arthur suggested they should turn back, but by now they were on the highway and the next junction wasn't for another eighteen miles.

Frank began to wonder about Clint - had he blurted something out? Surely not, he thought to himself. Clint was always quiet and discreet, not the sort of person who may divulge a secret. But then he remembered that Clint had been sent on the asteroid-mission by the state. Frank tried to convince himself this was 'out of proportion', but couldn't be sure. In the end, he wasn't too sure of anything anymore and decided to spill the beans.

"I was forced into retirement last year," he confessed to the others. "In actual fact, you could say I was bribed into retirement."

Dermot and Arthur were surprised to say the least, but decided not to

comment.

"After the asteroid was safely diverted into orbit, I was offered an excellent retirement package," Frank continued. "I hadn't even considered retiring at that point and wasn't too keen on the suggestion at the time."

"Suggestion?" queried Arthur. "I thought you said you were forced into retirement?"

"When I said I hadn't thought about it, I kept being told how much I deserved a long break, how good the retirement terms were, and that there was nothing to think about," said Frank.

"But no-one can force you to retire," Dermot said to him. "It has to be your own decision, surely?"

"I said I still wasn't sure, that it had come as a big surprise," Frank explained. "I needed time to think about things, so he agreed to meet me about this a few days later."

"Who agreed to meet you about the matter?" asked Dermot.

"I'm not at liberty to say," replied Frank.

Dermot and Arthur then looked at Clint.

"Don't look at me, I'm not at liberty to say either," he told them.

"So what happened next?" the ever-inquisitive Dermot asked.

"When I spoke to Jeanette she was all for it, especially when considering the terms offered," said Frank. "So I agreed to take early retirement."

"That's not what I'd call forcing you to retire," Dermot commented.

"No, but after I signed the terms and conditions I was 'asked' to do one final thing at NASA," said Frank.

"What was that?" asked Arthur.

"To close the case on the asteroid," Frank replied.

Dermot was surprised, though Arthur had had a feeling at the back of his mind that the asteroid may have had something to do with the matter.

"But why would NASA want to close that case, of all cases?" quizzed Dermot. "I don't understand? Besides, I thought you were the chief at NASA?"

Dermot and Arthur now began to piece things together.

"It was someone high-up who ordered you to close the case, wasn't it?" queried Dermot. "Was it the President? Or perhaps the Vice-President?"

"It was someone in authority, but I can categorically state that it was neither the President nor the Vice-President," Frank told them.

"But I can't understand why the state would want to close such a case," said Dermot. "NASA had wanted to study asteroids for sometime - surely, here was a brilliant example to study, which you didn't even need to travel

far to visit.”

“That’s what I believed,” said Frank. “I told them this was what NASA had been planning to study for years, but was told that the government didn’t have enough funds.”

“But asteroids don’t come along everyday,” commented Dermot. “Besides, I doubt it would have cost billions of dollars to send a probe to the asteroid, or did they forget that a space shuttle had recently been to more-than-observe the asteroid?”

Dermot then looked at Clint curiously, as if seeking confirmation that the shuttle had actually been to save the Earth from the asteroid, and that there was no cover-up.

“Everything that you’ve heard about the shuttle mission happened,” Clint told him.

“I emphasised the shuttle mission to him,” said Frank. “But they clearly wanted the case closed. When I asked why, I was told that NASA had already viewed an asteroid, and that money had to be deferred for other projects elsewhere.”

“Like Iraq and Afghanistan, I suppose?” Arthur chipped-in.

“I suspected all along that this was no ordinary asteroid,” Frank confessed. “The speed the asteroid was traveling at, the fact that it altered it’s speed on a handful of occasions. I thought there was something very peculiar about the asteroid, and I think someone in high-office also suspected something too. And before you ask, I’m not at liberty to say who.”

“Yes, but even taking in all these things, why would the state want to shoot you?” asked Arthur.

“Frank has become rather concerned over the last couple of days, after what had happened to Steve,” Clint then explained.

“You mean Dr di Pierri?” queried Dermot.

“Yes indeed,” replied Clint. “To be totally honest, I’ve become a bit concerned, too.”

“When you hear about a car bomb, the first thing you think of is that someone out there want’s to kill you,” said Frank. “I don’t consider the pentagon as terrorists, but with all that’s been going on recently, this could easily be made to look as an act of terrorism.”

“If this was terrorism we’d have heard about it by now, not only in Colorado but probably all over the world,” said Clint. “What is concerning is that we heard nothing, as though the whole matter was kept quiet.”

“Kept quiet by who?” asked Arthur. “The US government?”

"You said that this probably occurred at around the same time as the asteroid vanished?" Frank queried, to which Dermot nodded in confirmation. "I know Steve, and I believe that he would have asked for the case to be re-opened, when the asteroid was found to have disappeared."

"And because someone senior wanted the case closed they had to do something to get Steve out of the picture, so to speak?" queried Arthur, who became very interested in the case.

"Precisely," Frank replied.

"That's not the end of the story either," added Clint. "After we heard this, I tried to contact my 'partner-in-crime' on the shuttle last year, Corny."

"And what did he have to say about Steve?" asked Dermot. "Had he heard about the incident?"

"I don't know," replied Clint. "I was informed by Corny's daughter that he had recently been sent to Afghanistan."

Dermot and Arthur looked at each other, though for different reasons; Dermot in astonishment while Arthur, who had been considering 'spilling the beans' himself was now becoming rather concerned at some people on Earth.

"Perhaps you can see why we're so concerned?" Clint said to them. "I've been in the military all my life and have become used to battles, and the dangers of death just around the corner. So it's not very often when I get worried about 'invisible' threats. But can you imagine how someone like Frank must feel all of a sudden?"

Arthur was considering telling the others about the whole matter, and felt he was in good company. Perhaps if he was to come clean about the asteroid, these were the ideal people to confess to. But then Dermot jumped in.

"I note what you've told us, and wouldn't want to get caught up in something like that," he said. "But surely, you can't go around everyday with such worries hanging around you?"

"I don't want to make things sound worse, but if you don't show some concern for such matters it won't be long before you're six feet under," replied Clint. "Trust me."

"I suppose we'll never know who the gunman was aiming at," Dermot said on what was meant to be a more light-hearted note.

"Oh he was pointing at me alright," said Frank.

"I'm afraid I think he was, actually," added Arthur, at which point the others turned to look at him.

"You don't know that," commented Dermot.

"Oh I do," confirmed Arthur.

"How's that?" asked Dermot.

"Because it was me who stopped the gunman," confessed Arthur. "I felt something strange when I was on the stage. I couldn't be sure what it was though, until I went back to my seat. I could tell someone was aiming in our general direction."

"You mean to say you actually saw the guy, through all the darkness of the room?" queried Clint.

"Not exactly," replied Arthur, as the others looked at him curiously.

"There may have been a small light up on the stanchion, perhaps?" queried Dermot.

"Not exactly," replied Arthur again, as the others looked at him more curiously than ever.

"Did you say you stopped the gunman?" Frank asked him with great intrigue. "Could you tell us precisely how?"

"With my force," said Arthur. "You know, you must have seen it performed on some movies."

"Are you talking about 'the force' in Star Wars?" asked Frank.

"Yes, that was one of them," said Arthur. "I'm sure there were a few more movies with that kind of force. Rather realistic, I'd say."

Frank, Clint and Dermot looked at each other in disbelief.

"Something tells me you know more about that asteroid than we might otherwise believe," Frank said to Arthur.

"I see that you seem to have worked things out for yourself," Arthur replied.

"You're from that asteroid, aren't you?" Frank said to him. "Who exactly are you and what are you doing here on Earth?"

"I am indeed from that asteroid you refer to, but I'm just as human as you, or Clint, or Dermot," Arthur replied

"Okay, take your shirt off," Frank requested.

Arthur took his shirt off, to show a body that was no different to any of the others.

"I could show you other parts of my body, if you're that concerned," Arthur said to the other three. "I'm no alien from some other world who's come to invade your planet. I sense your concern, but you've nothing to be wary of. If I'd wanted to use my force against you I'd have done it by now."

"Okay, okay, so if you are human, how did you arrive on that asteroid?"

asked Dermot.

"Well, it's a long story, but my ancestors were originally from this planet," Arthur told him. "They left Earth a long, long, long time ago, in apprehension of a cataclysmic event."

"What cataclysmic event might that have been?" asked Frank.

"An asteroid was approaching Earth, which would have annihilated humans," said Arthur.

"Like the one that killed the dinosaurs?" queried Dermot, to which Arthur nodded. "So do you know how long ago your ancestors left Earth? About eleven million years ago perhaps?"

"Hold on a minute, aren't we forgetting one thing?" Clint then said to Dermot. "There are no records of human life on Earth dating back to such times. It's clear that our earliest ancestors only date back about two million years. And they could never have travelled to Outer Mongolia, never mind outer space."

"I thought you might only be able to see the small picture," muttered Arthur.

"Okay, okay, let's hear him out," said Frank as he turned to Arthur. "So when did your ancestors leave Earth and why have we not found any of their predecessors' remains?"

"I'm not a historian, and please bear in mind that I've been travelling the universe at vast speeds where time means very little," complained Arthur.

"However, since we approached Earth, I've become used to human timescales, and estimate that my ancestors left the planet 65 million years, at the time of the dinosaurs."

Frank, Clint and Dermot looked at each other in disbelief.

"You're probably unlikely to find human remains that far back, though I dare say there may be some secreted in Malham Cove," explained Arthur.

"Malham Cove? Where's that?" Frank whispered to Dermot.

"A limestone cliff somewhere in Northern England," explained Dermot. "I believe it has probably been submerged beneath the sea several times and hence composed of millions of layers of compressed limestone."

"The truth is that there weren't very many of us humans left," said Arthur.

"They basically lived in what is now Antarctica, where few dinosaurs lived. I believe they may have inhabited other parts of the planet, but were slowly forced to retreat to safer environments."

"But how many generations have passed since?" Dermot asked.

"Not as many as you might think," Arthur replied. "Are any of you familiar with the Twin's Paradox?"

"That's part of the Theory of Relativity," Dermot said to Frank.

"You know, as the theory goes, that anyone travelling at light speed will not have aged at all," Arthur said to the others, to which they all acknowledged. "Well, the craft my ancestors and I have been residing in has been traveling at up 90% the speed of light."

"Wowwwhh, how do you get a spacecraft to travel at that sort of speed?" Clint asked.

"I'll tell you that later," replied Arthur. "As I was about to say, someone travelling at 90% the speed of light will only age by 10% of the rate of someone on Earth. You should bear in mind that on our craft there were no germs or diseases, which allowed for a longer life. By that assumption, for someone to age 120 years, in Earth terms they will be 1200."

Frank, Clint and Dermot looked in astonishment at each other.

"There is an additional factor, I should emphasise," added Arthur.

"What's that?" asked Dermot.

"On my 'asteroid', we would spend about 75% of our lives in deep-freeze, or hibernation you might say," explained Arthur. "At this rate we would age 120 years in 4800 Earth years."

"So by my calculations there will have been something like thirteen-and-a-half thousand generations of you since leaving Earth," Dermot worked out.

"Are you saying that when your ancestors left Earth 65 million years ago, they had already developed crafts to travel at near-light speed?" Frank asked Arthur.

"I don't believe so, though I cannot say for certain," he replied. "As I understand it, those who left Earth were probably at a similar level of intelligence as yourselves. I'm sure you can appreciate however, that stories can become hyped-up or undercut, so to speak, over so many generations."

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" Clint then said to Arthur.

"I saved Frank, didn't I?" replied Arthur.

"How can we be sure that it was you who caused the gunman to fall?" Clint asked Arthur.

"I can demonstrate 'the force' somewhere out-of-the-way, perhaps," Arthur told him. "I suppose I could try something here in this car, but I wouldn't want to make things too obvious with all the cars on the highway watching. For now though, you'll just have to trust me."

Clint looked at Frank and Dermot for support, but he could tell that they each preferred to give Arthur the benefit of the doubt.

"That's your trouble here on Earth today," Arthur told them. "There's not

enough trust and friendship in the world. My ancestors couldn't live in a world of war and terrorism – they were more concerned with keeping the dinosaurs at bay.”

“I didn't know there were dinosaurs in Antarctica?” said Clint.

“I don't think Antarctica was in the precise same position in the world at the time, as it is now,” explained Frank.

“Oh there were some dinosaurs in Antarctica,” replied Arthur. “Maybe not the biggest or broadest dinosaurs, but my ancestors were afraid that if those dinosaurs were not kept at bay, they would end up growing larger and larger and eventually take over the land.”

“Why didn't they leave Earth earlier?” asked Clint.

“I can't really say for certain,” said Arthur. “Perhaps some of them did. Others may have thought dinosaurs were steadily decreasing, which is what some people consider today.”

“Couldn't they use ‘the force’ to help defend them?” asked Clint

“I believe my people didn't developed ‘the force’ until a lot later,” said Arthur. “Whether the force would have been of any use against a herd of brontosaurae or a pack of Tyranosaurus I don't know. Perhaps my ancestors intended to construct a nuclear missile, like some of your people today, in order to destroy the dinosaurs. Alas, the asteroid beat them to it.”

“So I suppose it would make sense to come back to Earth one day,” muttered Dermot.

“What puzzles me is why your ancestors never came sooner?” Frank asked Arthur. “Or did they?”

“Again, I can't say for certain,” replied Arthur. “When my ancestors left Earth, they went in several space craft. From what I understand, they eventually lost contact with each other as they scoured the galaxy. For all I know, some may have inhabited other planets. Some may still be out there in the cosmos, whilst others may have deceased. I simply don't know.”

“Have you visited other worlds?” asked Frank.

“Yes,” Arthur replied. “In fact, on my old craft there were people from another world. More like apes, actually. A bit like some characters I've seen on some films.”

“You mean Chewbecca, in Star Wars?” queried Frank.

“No, no, more like characters from ‘Planet of the Apes’,” said Arthur. “One of them was high-ranking and sometimes took charge of the craft, or asteroid, if you prefer.”

“Generally, I think what Arthur has said is plausible,” Dermot said to Frank, who seemed to agree with him. “What I find difficult to grasp is how to get a space craft to travel at near-light speed, let-alone an asteroid.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t developed overnight,” Arthur told him. “What I do know is that the asteroid has a very large combustion chamber, where similar events to those on stars occur.”

“Where hydrogen atoms smash into one-another at high speed to create helium, and produce nuclear energy?” Frank queried.

“Yes exactly,” said Arthur.

“But where do you get the hydrogen to create such energy?” asked Dermot.

“From large planets like your Jupiter,” Arthur told him. “It’s stored in a large ‘tank’, I suppose you might say. From there the hydrogen is released at ultra-hyper speeds to create the reactions, and so, the energy. You might like to try something like that here on Earth.”

“But the ‘hydrogen tank’ and combustion chamber must be.....” exclaimed Dermot, trying to assess how large these items may have been.

“That’s why we needed something as large as an asteroid,” said Arthur.

“The energy also helped to power electricity on the craft. You should try something like that here on Earth. There’s enough space to develop something like that. It will help the fight against global warming.”

Frank and Dermot were trying to take everything in, while Clint was still a little unsure.

“We also had two other important facilities on the asteroid,” Arthur informed them.

“Oh, what were they?” asked Frank.

“There was a smaller combustion chamber, where all carbon-dioxide, methane and other waste products went,” explained Arthur. “Here we used fission, like nuclear missiles, where the items were broken down into individual elements. Oxygen was re-circulated within the asteroid, while carbon, along with other elements, was used to produce various things including food. You may be put-off a little, but it wasn’t as bad as it may sound. As you may imagine, this acted as an auxiliary ‘tank’ as the energy created was also used to power the asteroid at times.”

“What about water?” Clint asked. “You must have used water at some stage.”

“Oh yes,” Arthur remembered. “That was also produced following similar reactions, from hydrogen and oxygen of course. That leads me to the

second facility within the asteroid I was referring to, a bit like a super-huge reservoir.”

Even Clint was now beginning to accept Arthur, and, along with Frank and Dermot, was becoming ever-more fascinated by what he was being told.

“You know, you really are intelligent enough to develop things like what I’ve described, here on Earth,” Arthur said to them. “I’m afraid too many people in authority are too obsessed with other matters, mainly power and money. If you’re all interested, I could help you all to help the environment of this planet. You know, this is a perfect planet to live on, you shouldn’t let it be spoilt by anyone.”

Frank and Dermot were certainly keen on Arthur’s suggestion, but were unsure whether they should give it their full backing just yet.

“I’ve noticed how often people have asked themselves whether there is life elsewhere in the universe,” Arthur then commented. “Well now you know that’s true.”

“I thought you said your ancestors were originally from Earth?” Clint queried.

“That is true as well, but I can vouch for alternate life in the universe,” replied Arthur. “As I said earlier, there were people, well, apes actually, from another world on that asteroid. For all I know, they may have been taken to another planet by my ancestors, and eventually colonized the planet.”

“What exactly are you trying to say?” asked Frank.

“That anything is possible if you put your mind to it,” replied Arthur. “More to the point however, perhaps someone else from outer space may come and visit Earth another day. It would be a sad day however, if the Earth we know was burnt out like a tinderbox because of global warming.”

“The way Earth’s going it may be destroyed by the ravages of war and terrorism,” commented Dermot.

“That’s as maybe,” said Arthur. “You wouldn’t let that happen though if you could help it, would you?”

“No, we certainly wouldn’t,” said Frank. “But you’re forgetting one thing – we need money to develop the things you’re suggesting, money which I know I haven’t got.”

“Nor me,” added Dermot and Clint simultaneously.

“No, but you could help me influence a man who has the money and authority to help with such things,” Arthur told them. “As a matter of fact, we saw him today, and he has strong views on the environment.”

“The Governor of California,” Frank, Clint and Dermot all said

simultaneously as they looked at each other.

Four Hours to Neptune

That evening, Frank & Clint, and Dermot & Arthur went their separate ways, but they each visited the conference centre to check if everything had been sorted and that the conference would go ahead the next day.

The following morning, the four of them, together with all the other astronomers in town, went to the second day's conference. Though Frank, Clint and Dermot now knew Arthur's true identity, they decided to remain silent. Some of the items on the previous day's agenda had been carried forward, while others were scrapped.

At the end of the day's conference, the four of them went looking around the centre in search of the Governor of California. Unfortunately, largely due to the previous day's events, there was strict security around the conference hall, and especially surrounding the Governor of California.

"It's no use," said Dermot. "I don't think we'll get to meet him today."

"Why don't you wait inside," suggested Frank. "Clint and me can go outside, in case the 'Governor goes out of one of the back doors."

"Good idea," said Arthur. "I'm sure he's still here somewhere."

Arthur was correct, though only just. As Clint walked around the back he saw a group of tall, burly men walking out of a door. It looked like someone was with them, though he couldn't tell who. Then, as they got into two cars, he noticed the Governor of California was amongst them.

"Hey Governor," he shouted, and waved to try to draw his attention.

Unfortunately, this was in vain, as the cars drove off rather quickly. Clint then went back to look for Frank. To get back to the entrance of the conference centre, Clint had to walk around the car park and another couple of streets. When he met Frank, Dermot and Arthur were there with him, and had been thrown out by security guards.

"Aghhh, it's no use," said Dermot.

"We can't give up now," said Frank. "We'll just have to try something different tomorrow."

"Yes, but how are we going to get past the security guards and bodyguards?" queried Clint. "We don't stand a chance."

"Frank's right," said Arthur. "There's more than one way to skin a cat."

"Do you have anything in mind?" asked Frank.

"I may be able to get a message to him," said Arthur.

“How??” asked Frank.

“Just trust me,” replied Arthur.

It had been hot that day, so they each went back to their hotel rooms for a shower. Dermot and Arthur wanted to gain support and help the situation. They met at the hotel entrance a little later that evening.

“So tell me, Arthur, what other ideas do you have in that mind of yours?” Dermot asked.

“Quite a few, actually,” replied Arthur. “What surprises me is why no-one has thought of many of them before. They’re not exactly difficult to achieve, nor do they require much imagination.”

This made Dermot think to himself briefly, trying to think of ideas which would help with global warming.

“Europe is supposed to be green, isn’t it?” queried Arthur. “Greener than this country we’re in right now, anyway.”

“Oh definitely, definitely,” said Dermot.

“Well why hasn’t it made it a requirement for all future houses to contain solar windows?” asked Arthur. “I can recall when I was in the UK, some new houses were being fitted with solar windows, but the government or opposition never proposed this be made statutory.”

“Oh I fully agree with your thoughts,” muttered Dermot.

“And what about the UK, and Ireland come to that, they’re surrounded by water,” Arthur said to him.

“Yes, you’re right there,” said Dermot.

“Well why haven’t they developed more desalination plants around the coasts,” questioned Arthur.

“I think they’re concerned that it would generate too much carbon, like power stations,” suggested Dermot.

“Not if they were generated by wind power or solar power,” commented Arthur. “Or water power, come to that. The power of the waves could generate enough energy to run such plants.”

“Especially with some of the weather they’ve been having over there recently,” added Dermot.

“Precisely,” commented Arthur. “The trouble with society is that everything revolves around money. Central governments are more interested in the stock market than they are in global warming.”

“You’re right there,” agreed Dermot. “I just wish there was something we could do about these things.”

“There is,” Arthur told him.

“And what might that be?” asked Dermot.

“Many governments are democratic, are they not?” queried Arthur. “We can all vote the current lot out.”

“The problem then becomes who to vote for instead,” said Dermot. “Take the UK for instance. They had a socialist government thirty years ago. They didn’t run the finances too well and were voted out, in favour of a party who were all for the rich.”

“And what happened to them?” Arthur asked.

“They ran the UK for eighteen years, before they were thrown out in favour of a more left-of-centre party,” Dermot told him. “If you ask me, they were as much for business as the previous lot. I remember them promising to look after Health and Education. They introduced they’re own measures, but the results weren’t very different than if the previous lot had remained.”

“Ohhh,” said Arthur sadly. “What about the rest of Europe? Don’t you think there are better national leaders?”

“Some perhaps are, I grant you,” commented Dermot. “But I can think of a few that are probably more corrupt than the UK government. And as for the lunatic running this country, I’m glad he’s not going to be around much longer.”

“From what I’ve seen and heard of the US president, I think he talks out of his backside,” Arthur commented. “I just hope his successor is better.”

“Well, Arthur, I don’t think he, or she, could be much worse,” replied Dermot. “And the thing you’ve got to remember is that he and his European colleagues are the good guys.”

“I take your point,” said Arthur. “From what I’ve seen in other parts of the world many countries are led by tyrants, dictators and warlords. The thing is that if we are to prevent total disintegration of Earth by global warming over the next hundred years or so, we need the support of the US and Europe.”

“I know, I know,” muttered Dermot.

Arthur was beginning to think he should have stayed on the Interstellar Pilgrim, and could understand why Professor Schmidt decided to remain there. He was in no doubt that after the others had seen Earth for themselves, on film at least, they too felt the same way.

“Hey, Arthur, I’m a bit thirsty,” Dermot then said. “Do you mind if we stay at this bar for a little while, so I can wet my loins, so to speak? They may sell food here too.”

Arthur wasn’t fussed and didn’t feel like walking around, so agreed. This

wasn't their usual bar, but after they'd had a drink and looked at the menu, decided to stay for a while longer.

"Do you think the Governor of California is really the person to discuss global warming with?" asked Arthur. "Perhaps Mr Universe may have some views that are out of this world."

"You don't think the former Mr Universe comes from out of this world, by any chance, do you?" Dermot queried with Arthur.

"I don't know where he's from, but he does look a bit different from most men," Arthur pointed out, to which Dermot laughed.

"What's so funny?" asked Arthur.

"The Governor of California isn't from outer space," Dermot giggled. "The title Mr Universe was bestowed annually to the man judged as the world's best body-builder. He doesn't look that different from other men, just that he is, or once was, very muscular. I doubt he needs all those muscles any longer – he has enough bodyguards of his own."

"He doesn't speak like most Americans, though" said Arthur.

"That's because he wasn't born here," Dermot told him. "He's actually from somewhere in Europe."

Arthur's face went red with embarrassment. Then his head began to drop.

"Oh come, come, now, Arthur," Dermot said to him. "You shouldn't get too embarrassed. You'll find we all have our embarrassing moments."

"It's not that I'm bothered about," replied Arthur. "I doubt then that the Governor of California will do much to save Earth from global warming. He's probably like most leaders, just hungry for power and money."

"I wouldn't say that," said Dermot. "Fundamentally, he represents the same party as the US President, but they're very different in other ways. At least the Governor of California has green views and has introduced measures to make this state more environmentally-friendly."

"So how do you think he could help?" Arthur asked.

"Well, he has plenty of money for a start – that's always a good starting point," said Dermot. "I think if he takes a look at your car, he may be willing to help fund the manufacturing of it."

"What, do you think he'll pay for the necessary men, machinery and manufacturing plants?" queried Arthur.

"Possibly," said Dermot. "As long as you sell the idea to him, and guarantee him a cut of the profits."

"So it boils down to money again," commented Arthur.

"I'm afraid so," said Dermot. "Money may be route of all evil, but it does have it's benefits. As it happens, that's probably the easy bit of the

equation.”

“Why?” asked Arthur. “What else do we have to do?”

“Sell the new car to the American people,” Dermot explained. “They aren’t exactly the greenest society in the world, and are the world’s worst polluters. The thing is, if we can sell this idea to the American people, this should catch on elsewhere. That’s another reason why we need the support of the Governor of California.”

Frank and Clint had other questions on their minds, in the meantime. They decided to go to a small, quiet, restaurant on the outskirts of town, which they noticed when passing earlier in the day.

“What did you think of Arthur?” Clint asked his colleague. “Do you think he is who he claims to be, or do you think he may be just an eccentric old crony?”

“Well he is a professor of the European Space Agency,” Frank replied.

“Beyond that, I can’t really be sure? What do you say?”

“I’m not really sure either,” said Clint. “He looks too much like one of us to believe anything else.”

“We shouldn’t expect all beings from outer space to be short, green and with pointed ears, though,” Frank emphasised. “We’ve got to put that sort of image out of our heads.”

“Yes, but do you seriously believe there are people in outer space?” asked a doubtful Clint.

“Oh indeed I do,” said Frank.

“Do you think man can evolve, leave Earth, and come back again another day?” queried Clint.

“I certainly think it’s possible,” Frank replied. “Think for a minute, the oldest fossils of man are over 2 million years old. That’s how long it’s taken for man to evolve into what he is today.”

Clint just looked at Frank inquisitively.

“Arthur claimed that his ancestors left Earth around the time the dinosaurs became extinct, 65 million years ago,” Frank said to him. “Don’t you see, if man can evolve in two million years, he could have come and gone thirty times over. Perhaps earlier man may have become extinct himself, through pollution or global warming.”

“I suppose even if it took another million years for Earth to revert back to it’s original structure and atmosphere after global warming, man could still have seen the planet on twenty different occasions since the dinosaurs went their own way,” added Clint.

"Absolutely," agreed Frank.

"But do you really think we are just one of a number of human races to have evolved on Earth?" Clint questioned.

"No, in actual fact I don't," answered Frank. "What I do think is that we perhaps don't know as much about our planet and its history as we sometimes like to believe. We must also consider that though man has existed for two million years, 99.9% of his development has occurred in the past ten thousand years."

"And I suppose over 90% of that development occurred in the past two hundred years or so," added Clint.

"Exactly," said Frank. "That's why I can accept some of the things Arthur told us. What I find awkward to accept is a ship traveling through space at nearly light speed. And not just any space ship, but a whole asteroid."

"I don't have a calculator on me at the moment, Frank, but how much is the speed of light in miles-per hour?" Clint queried .

"A little under six-hundred-and seventy million miles," Frank told him.

"That's about a quarter of the way to Neptune."

"Geeeeeeee!!!" said Clint. "So a space ship traveling at the speed of light could get to Neptune in 4 hours."

"Just over," said Frank. "The other thing that fascinates me is that motor of his. If we can keep him on our side we may be able to develop the next big revolution."

"Do you think that could be produced en-mass?" asked Clint.

"I don't see why not," replied Frank. "The problem is selling the idea to America. This sort of invention will have to come from somewhere new. I can't see any major motor manufacturers taking up the idea."

The next morning, Frank, Clint, Dermot and Arthur met outside the conference centre. This was due to be the final day, though that would depend on how much the conference would get through on the day, following the abandoned one a couple of days earlier.

Frank, Clint and Dermot were interested in how Arthur was going to inform the Governor of California of his new vehicle, and wanted to chip-in themselves.

"Don't worry too much," Arthur told the others. "I know how I can get a message across to the 'Governor.'"

"How's that?" asked Clint.

"Oh, Arthur has his ways and means," commented Dermot. "Don't you,

Arthur?"

Arthur simply smiled and said nothing. He had thought about telling them he would use his 'force' to get the message across, but as there were other people waiting outside the conference centre, he thought better of it. The doors to the conference centre were soon opened. Frank, Clint, Dermot, Arthur, and all the other people who had been waiting outside, now went to take their seats. While the audience were in discussion, Arthur explained quietly what he was going to do.

"You'll have to be careful," Frank told him. "We don't want to arouse any guard's suspicions. If they get wind you're up to something, they'll have you."

"And we wouldn't want that," added Clint.

"You'd better make sure you get the 'Governor at the right moment," added Dermot. "You won't want to make him seem as though he's lost or in a trance, or people will become concerned."

"Trust me," Arthur just said to the others

Just then, a couple of heavy coughs could be heard into a microphone.

"Good morning ladies & gentlemen," announced the Governor of California. "Please take your seats for the final day of this year's International Astronomers Convention. We've decided to withdraw a couple of items from the agenda, in an effort to ensure this is all completed on schedule. If anyone would like to raise any of these items, this may be done under the final item, Any Other Business."

The Governor of California then pointed to the conference screen, which had the amended agenda. Arthur was focusing on the 'Governor, ready to make his next move, but felt the moment wasn't quite right.

"So with no further ado, I'll hand you over to NASA Professor-in-Chief, Dr Graham Ferguson," the Governor announced, before leading a hand-clap as Dr Ferguson approached. It was now that Arthur 'read' the names, addresses and telephone numbers of Frank and Dermot to the Governor, and told him to consult them about a new, green and revolutionary form of transport.

Briefly, it appeared that the 'Governor was applauding Dr Ferguson a little vigorously. Arthur was trying to finish his message to the 'Governor, when Dr Ferguson came across his view to pick up the microphone. This broke Arthur's 'hold' on the 'Governor, and he didn't manage to complete his message, missing probably the most important name & number of all, his own. Arthur was disappointed, but perhaps there may be another chance to catch the Governor of California's attention before the conference

ended.

Frank meanwhile, unaware that he would hear from the 'Governor in the near future, had noticed that one of the items taken off the day's agenda was the ex-new moon, Jenna. Arthur hadn't really noticed, though would have been relieved about this, but Frank had wanted to discuss it's disappearance.

This was soon forgotten though, as the future of space travel was raised. Dr Ferguson introduced NASA's future plans to the audience, before he called some other eminent scientists to discuss their ideas on space travel, Dermot among them.

That lunchtime, Dermot and Arthur went to dine at the conference centre bar, while Frank and Clint went for a wander outside. They met up again after lunch, by which time all items on the agenda had been completed, which left time for general questions and discussions.

Several of the audience gave their verdicts on Arthur's comments a few days earlier. Most disagreed with his views, but some said they could see where he was coming from, and felt his comments should be given full consideration. Frank put his hand up a couple of times too, but didn't get much attention.

"What's your query, Frank?" Clint whispered to him. "Perhaps Dermot or Arthur can raise it for you, as I'm sure they'll get more attention."

"I can't say too much – it's personal," Frank replied.

"How personal can it be?" Clint asked him.

"It's about Steve – you remember, Steve de Pierri," said Frank. "I'd like to know what happened to him, and how he is."

"You can't ask that," Clint told him. "If you really want to know, why don't you ask Robert Langman one day. Besides, someone's already tried to get rid of you."

"And failed," Frank replied. "There's no-one here to get me now."

"Not now maybe, but what about tomorrow or next week," Clint quietly emphasised. "Who's to say someone else won't try something similar? And Arthur won't be around to save you next time."

"Is everything okay?" Dermot turned around and asked. "Is there anything you'd like me to raise on your behalf?"

"No thanks," Clint jumped in saying, ahead of Frank.

"As a matter of fact, there is something I'd like to raise," Frank then said a few moments later. Clint turned around as though to wash his hands of what he was afraid Frank would say.

"I'd like to ask about the disappearing moon, Jenna, thanks," said Frank.

"I don't think that's a good idea," replied Dermot. "Especially now it's been taken it off the agenda."

"All the more reason to raise the matter now," said Frank.

"I'm sure someone else will raise this sooner or later, don't you think?" Dermot said, as Clint and Arthur agreed. "Let someone else raise the matter, let them take any possible attention away from you."

"Like you, you mean?" Frank queried.

"I don't think I'm the right person to divert attention away from you," whispered Dermot.

Sure enough, the next question was indeed about the disappearing moon, or should that be asteroid. All Dr Ferguson was prepared to say was that NASA had been unable to trace the asteroid since its disappearance. Members of the audience debated as to how it had disappeared, some suggesting that it had imploded abnormally, while others thought it may have broken up into little pieces while under the influence of Earth's orbit. Arthur knew otherwise, but his lips were sealed. Frank suspected what had really occurred, but he could say nothing before another member of the audience raised a different question.

By the time the conference ended that afternoon, the four of them were all a bit worn out. They all agreed to meet up later that night, however, to discuss other matters, before they all went their own ways. Conveniently, they went to a small, quiet, country restaurant a little out of town.

"So Arthur, did you manage to get through to the Governor of California?" Dermot asked.

"Yes thank you," Arthur replied. "I didn't manage to get everything across, as Dr Ferguson got in my way and broke up my rhythm, so to speak."

"So what did you tell him?" Frank asked.

"I gave him some names, addresses and contacts," Arthur told him, as he took out a pen and paper, and wrote the details on it before passing the sheet to Frank. "These are your details are they not?"

Frank was surprised as he read the piece of paper.

"If anything's wrong please let me know," Arthur added. "It's probably too late to pass the info on to the 'Governor now, but I can try to send the message another way."

"Erhh, everything appears to be in order," mumbled a rather gobsmacked Frank, before handing the piece of paper to Dermot.

"I see you've got my details, too," said Dermot. "Where did you get all the information from?"

“Basically, it’s just telepathy,” explained Arthur. “I hope you don’t mind me passing on this information?”

“I don’t mind, though I don’t think Jeanette would be too keen,” said Frank. “I’d be grateful if you kept this information to yourself.”

“Of course I will,” said Arthur.

“I notice you haven’t got my details,” Clint then queried.

“I was going to pass them on, and my own details too, but that was when Dr Ferguson got in the way,” Arthur replied. “Forgive me if I’m wrong, but I didn’t think you were as keen on the green issues as Frank, Dermot or myself, so I was going to leave your details ‘til last.”

“Well, I’m not really a green person, so to speak, but I am coming around to many of your ideas,” Clint admitted. “The question now is, how are you going to demonstrate your ideas if you’re taking the car home tomorrow?”

“He’s got a point,” added Frank.

Arthur then stared briefly into Frank’s eyes, before turning his attention to Clint, and eventually to Dermot.

“There we are,” said Arthur, as the others shook their heads for a second.

“You should all know as much about the digital motor as I do, now. I’ll send some images to your home PCs. That should help if the Governor asks to see the model, although I suppose I could leave the motor behind, if you’re prepared to take care of it.”

“Erhhh, I think you’ve done enough to help for the time being,” Dermot told Arthur, as he could see Frank and Clint weren’t too keen on the latest suggestion. “Besides, how are we going to get to LA airport without your car?”

“That’s fine by me,” said Arthur

“Where are you two flying to?” Clint then asked.

“Paris, Charles de Gaulle airport,” said Dermot. “We were considering traveling via Heathrow, but I’m glad we’re not now. We may have had to go through Terminal 5, with the car ending up in Tokyo! And I don’t think that would help our cause.”

As they were all laughing, a waiter came along with the drinks, and asked if they were ready to order food. The four of them each had a quick look at the menu, before giving their orders to the waiter.

“So, Arthur, what do you think of California?” Frank then asked after the waiter left.

“I don’t think I could really comment,” said Arthur. “I’ve certainly enjoyed the nights out, and I quite like the town of San Bernardino, but I gather there’s a lot more to see in California.”

“Well, what do you say we stop off in LA tomorrow?” suggested Dermot.

“We could probably take a bus ride to Beverley Hills to see the stars.”

“The TV & movie stars, he means,” added Clint.

“Yes I did work that one out myself, actually,” commented Arthur, to which Frank and Dermot laughed.

“So, is there anyone in Hollywood that takes your fancy?” Dermot asked him.

“I don’t watch a lot of movies, but if you mean ladies, I quite like Cindy Crawford,” said Arthur.

“She’s a cracker, ain’t she,” commented Dermot. “How about you, Clint – does anyone take your fancy?”

“I’m not really one for movies, though I once had a soft spot for Raquel Welch,” Clint replied.

“I used to like her, but I’m more for Jody Foster, right now,” said Frank.

“I’m more for easy listening these days – I love relaxing to Celine Dion, and I don’t mind a little Whitney, now and then.”

“How would the two of you like to come along to LA with us?” Dermot then asked. “We can take a ride to Beverley Hills, what do you say?”

Frank and Clint looked at each other, a little unsure. Arthur wasn’t too keen either, as he wanted to get back home and speak to (Major) Henry Retono.

“To be honest, it’s probably a bit too far for us,” said Clint.

“It shouldn’t be too far, only about 50 miles I should imagine,” said Dermot.

“I know, but don’t forget we’ve travelled from the opposite side of the country,” Frank pointed out. “It would add another 100 miles to our journey.”

“Couldn’t you pick up a flight from LA airport to Colorado?” Dermot queried.

“Not at short notice,” replied Clint. “Besides, I don’t think our wives would be too happy if they found out we’d been to Hollywood.”

“Oh well, never mind,” said Dermot. “The more ladies for us, eh Arthur!”

Arthur just smiled, but said nothing, while Frank and Clint picked up their pints.

“I would like to go to LA, but you don’t mind if we get back to business just now?” Arthur then asked the others.

“I didn’t think there was much more to discuss, now that you’ve ‘informed’ us of your digital car,” said Frank. “The ‘Governor knows our telephone numbers and site addresses, and is going to contact us at some point.”

“Ah yes, but what are we going to tell the ‘Governor?’” Arthur asked the others.

“Well, we’re going to have to sell the idea to him,” Frank said.

“Exactly,” said Arthur. “And do you know how you’re going to sell the idea to him?”

“First of all we’re going to have to convince him how good the motor is and emphasise all the benefits,” said Frank.

“Especially the car’s green credentials,” added Dermot.

“That’s fine,” said Arthur, before turning to Clint. “Do you want me to include you in this?”

“I don’t mind being part of this, but I thought you hadn’t given my details to the ‘Governor?’” he queried.

“I would have done so if my contact with the ‘Governor’ hadn’t been broken,” Arthur told him. “If you don’t want to become involved, however, please say so now.”

“You may as well,” Frank said to him. “You now know how the motor works, and besides, I could do with a bit of support.”

Clint wasn’t too sure, but nodded in agreement, to be part of the project, to the relief of the others.

“Good,” said Arthur. “Now, I don’t know which of you the Governor of California is going to contact, but I’m sure if you emphasise your own credentials, it will help to settle him.”

“What, like mentioning during the course of discussions, that I’m the Director of Development for the European Space Agency,” queried Dermot.

“Exactly,” said Arthur. “I’m sure he wouldn’t be any less impressed by you, Frank, if you mention that you were the former Professor in Chief at NASA.”

“Oh sure, sure I will,” Frank replied.

“Good,” said Arthur. “Now, if you can sell the idea of the digital car to the Governor, you’ll have to emphasise how positive this all is, but that you haven’t sufficient support to make the project work.”

“Like manufacturing the digital car?” queried Dermot.

“Precisely,” said Arthur. “Before then, however, he’s going to want to see the digital car in action. If you don’t really want the car kept here, that’s where I’m going to have to come in. If you can let me know, so as I can arrange to take my car over here at some point.”

“Didn’t you say you know the bloke who’s producing these cars?” Dermot asked Arthur, to which he nodded. “Do you think you could arrange for me

to have one of those digital cars?"

"Possibly, possibly," replied Arthur, giving the suggestion careful thought. "I quite like the idea of this, and would like the support of the European Space Agency, but remember, this isn't their project."

"Oh no, no, no," Dermot replied. "I'm sure they'd support the idea, but I doubt they would have enough funds to take on this sort of project. They haven't enough for the current program of space exploration."

"We can discuss this on our return home," said Arthur.

"This man that you know, who's producing these cars - is he like you?" Frank asked. "You know what I'm getting at, don't you?"

"Oh yes, he's a nice chap - a good friend of mine," said Arthur, trying to divert the question.

As luck would have it, a waiter came along and asked which of them had ordered a Tex-Mex Special, to which Frank put his hand up, so the issue was quickly 'swept under the carpet'.

The four of them agreed a plan of action to take for their project, but didn't stay too long that evening. They agreed to keep in touch with each other, and waved farewell as they went to their hotels.

Frank and Clint had intended to leave early the next morning, and sure enough, left San Bernardino before the rush hour began. They had a long day ahead of them, on their 1000-mile journey home to Colorado Springs. Neither of them could quite believe they had met a man not born on Earth. "Do you believe that guy we met, Arthur?" Clint asked Frank a couple of times.

"I'm not totally convinced myself, and I know it seems very difficult to believe, but there was definitely something very odd with that asteroid last year," replied Frank.

"Yeah, but do you think he is who he told us he is, or do you think he's an imposter?" Clint queried.

"I don't know, I really don't know," said Frank. "After those events with that asteroid, or whatever it was, nothing would surprise me. Do you believe he was from outer space, or do you think that car of his was made by magic?"

"I don't know," said Clint.

"He's certainly managed to inform me about the car and it's itinerary," said Frank. "How about you?"

"I'll give him that," said Clint. "Are you going to follow-up that idea of manufacturing a car like the one Arthur had?"

"I'd like to, but I haven't got the money to do something like that," said Frank. "Not even with what I received for my retirement."

"I suppose that was peanuts compared to what you'd need to build a car manufacturing plant," Clint mumbled.

"Exactly," said Frank. "Besides, I'm not going to risk what I've earned, all on a new idea which ain't even guaranteed to give me my money back."

"I don't think that was what Bill Gates said, twenty-odd years ago," said Clint.

"Well I'm not Bill Gates!" exclaimed Frank. "Besides, let's wait and see if we hear anything from the Governor of California. That may tell us a little more just how authentic this idea really is."

"And how authentic Arthur may be?" added Clint.

"And what about that asteroid, or whatever may have been orbiting the planet?" added Frank. "As hard as it may be to believe that he came from that thing, I just can't rule it all out."

"Well I don't believe for one minute that the asteroid disappeared," said Clint. "Do you think it could have been broken up into thousands of little pieces, by the Earth's orbit?"

"It's possible, but I doubt it," answered Frank. "Someone, somewhere on Earth should have observed something."

Frank and Clint spent much of the time on their journey home discussing Arthur and the asteroid. They each tried to change the subject from time to time, but inevitably ended up in one way or another, referring back to original debate. As was the case since the asteroid was first discovered hurtling towards Earth, it seemed to ask more questions than it answered.

In The Air (Tonight?)

Arthur and Dermot didn't have nearly as far to travel. They could afford to relax a bit more, but set off for Los Angeles after the rush hour had finished. Dermot was determined to see Hollywood, now he was so close, though Arthur wasn't so keen. First, he suggested they had a lot of work to catch up with back in Europe, but Dermot wasn't convinced.

In actual fact, Arthur intended to fly back to Leeds/Bradford airport, to meet his former Major, Henry Retono. He had intended to keep in touch with him during the convention, but this soon became overtaken by other events. He thought about telling Dermot he had an emergency call from Tenerife, in an effort to excuse himself, but thought that Dermot would be

prepared to sanction additional leave, especially if he knew Arthur was going to discuss arranging a digital car to be sent to Dermot.

It only took half hour before they were on the outskirts of LA. The first thing they did was to try to re-book their flight back to Paris, which they managed to do without much of a problem. The fact that the convention had been delayed gave them a perfect excuse for this. They then went to book a hotel for the night, before they went to visit Beverley Hills and Hollywood. As it happened, Arthur rather enjoyed the day. They had lunch in one bar and tea in another, managed to see a few stars (though these didn't include Cindy Crawford or Jody Foster) and even talked to one or two. All in all, they were both knackered by the evening.

On Saturday evening, following the return flight, Arthur was stuck at Paris local airport. Everything had seemed fine that morning at LA Main. He and Dermot checked-in on time and their flight back to Charles de Gaulle was on time. Then, out of the blue, there came a bomb scare. Everything at the airport was put on hold, while security staff checked the airport thoroughly. Eventually, clearance was given for all previous arrangements to proceed.

This delayed Arthur & Dermot's return flight, and they didn't arrive back at Charles de Gaulle until 5.30 pm. Dermot suggested to Arthur that he could stay the night at his house. Arthur thought about this for a moment, but as there seemed enough time to get to Paris local airport to catch the last flight to Tenerife, he thanked Dermot for the offer but politely declined.

However, when he arrived at Paris local, he found that his flight to Tenerife hadn't been booked in time.

"What do you mean?" asked Arthur.

"You were due to fly last evening, non?" a lady at check-in queried with Arthur, in her French accent.

"I was due to fly last night, but the International Astronomer's Convention was delayed by a day due to a scare on Tuesday," Arthur insisted. "You must have heard about it, there was an assassination attempt on the Governor of California," though Arthur knew otherwise.

The lady at check-in went to call her supervisor. Arthur could see them in discussion. They eventually came over to him, just as the announcement for the final boarding of flight AFR117 to Tenerife was made.

"We have received a request to transfer from Friday's 6 pm flight to this evening's flight," the lady said to Arthur, to which he grinned briefly.

"However, we did not receive notification of this in time."

“What!” Arthur said loudly. “You received over 24 hours notice.”

“I know, but I’m afraid we require 48 hours notice so as we can re-arrange to re-schedules,” she told him.

“What schedules?” Arthur queried. “It’s only one addition to a probably-under-booked flight.”

“I understand that you have a large cargo to go onboard, non?” the lady queried.

“If you mean my car, then yes, I do,” he replied.

“It is for this we need 48 hours notice of re-booking, I’m afraid,” she told him.

“Yes, but surely there isn’t a great deal of cargo on the plane,” insisted Arthur. “You were given over 36 hours notice, so this shouldn’t be a problem, surely?”

“If it was just small luggage there would be no problem, but I am afraid we need 48 hours notice for any additional large cargo,” the lady informed him.

Arthur smiled at her and offered to pay for the additional flight, to which the lady may have misunderstood his intentions. She went over to speak to her supervisor, who walked over to Arthur with an angry face.

“We do not take bribes,” the supervisor told him. “Flight AFR117 is now waiting to leave and we cannot hold this up any longer.”

“But, but, I’m from the European Space Agency,” Arthur said to her. “I need to get to Tenerife, to the observatory with clear skies. I can’t afford to study the sky from a dusty old city like Paris.”

“It doesn’t matter if you were from the French ministry – we do require 48 hours notice for additional large cargo,” said the supervisor. “Good day.”

“Now look here!” Arthur shouted. “What am I going to do then – I can’t wait until Monday morning to return to Tenerife.”

The supervisor suddenly stopped, turned around, and called the lady Arthur had been dealing with over to her. They were checking data on a PC, and spoke in French with one-another. They were unaware that Arthur understood what they were discussing, or what he could hear of them discussing, at least.

The supervisor then walked back to Arthur. He could see her holding something in her right hand.

“Do you expect me to wait until Monday morning for my flight?” he then asked.

“Monsieur, you have been booked to return to Tenerife tomorrow morning,” the supervisor told him.

“But, but, but I thought you said you required 48 hours notice before you can book large cargo in for flights?” he queried. “If you’d have booked my car in when I first arrived, I could have been on that flight right now.”

“Monsieur, this booking was made yesterday morning, when you first informed us that you would be unable to travel on your originally-booked flight,” she replied.

“No-one informed me that I was booked to travel tomorrow morning,” said Arthur.

“I can assure you that you were informed,” the supervisor replied.

Perhaps Dermot hadn’t told him or had misunderstood the instructions when he re-arranged the flights the previous morning, Arthur thought.

“I’m sorry, I just assumed that I would be travelling on AFR117,” said Arthur.

“You English, you always rely on assumptions – which are usually wrong!” the supervisor told him, before walking off, and left the lady to deal with him.

“Here are your tickets for flight AFR008, for Tenerife Nord at 9.30 tomorrow morning, monsieur,” she said. “Please ensure your car is ready at the airport multistory car park by 7.30. You can confirm the car’s registration, model and make now if you wish.”

Arthur was in two minds, angry he had missed the last flight of the day to Tenerife, but relieved that he had the tickets for the next flight, albeit 15 hours later. He confirmed the details of the car to the lady, before walking off to look for food.

Arthur now regretted not accepting Dermot’s offer to stay the night at his house, and decided to ring him while he was waiting for his order. Unfortunately, there was no reply. After he had finished his southern fried chicken and French fries, Arthur decided to ring Dermot on his mobile.

“Hello, Dermot O’Hagan, can I help at all?” was the reply on his mobile.

“Hello Dermot, it’s me, Arthur,” he replied.

“Oh hello Arthur, where are you - you can’t be back already?” queried Dermot.

“I’m afraid I’m stuck at Paris local airport,” Arthur told him. “Apparently, they couldn’t book me in for tonight’s flight. I was told they required 48 hours notice for rescheduling large cargo flights.”

“They didn’t tell me that when I asked to re-book our flights yesterday,” Dermot told him.

“Well never mind, they’ve booked me to fly back tomorrow morning,” Arthur replied. “Can I stay at your house for the night?”

"You know you're welcome to stay," said Dermot. "I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little while though, as I've taken my family out for the evening. They hadn't seen me for a while, so I thought I'd better treat them. You know what families can get like."

"Yes, yes, quite," replied Arthur, thinking whether it was worth leaving the airport just for the night, and then having to leave Dermot's house early next morning to check-in back at the airport again. "Would you say it would be okay to stay the night here at the airport?"

"I don't see why not," said Dermot. "It's not as plush as LA or JFK, or even Charles de Gaulle, but there are always a few bars with satellite TV. You're welcome to come to my house, if you prefer."

"Thanks for the offer, but on the face of it, perhaps it may be best if I stay here for the night," replied Arthur. "At least I don't have to worry about checking-in."

"Okay then," said Dermot. "I'll have to go now, but I'll speak to you soon. Cheerio."

Arthur heard a beep on his mobile and noticed that there was only 2 euros credit left on it. He pondered for a few moments what to do next, before finishing his drink and wandering off to the chemist, where he could get more credit. When he got there however, he saw the chemist had closed for the night.

"Damned!" he said to himself. "I knew I should have topped it up before I left."

As he continued to wander about the airport, he suddenly thought that he could have used his 'force' to convince the supervisor at the check-out that his car had been booked for the flight to Tenerife.

"Damned, damned, and damned again!" he said.

Unfortunately, it was too late to do anything about it now. There are some things you can use the force for, but reversing time wasn't one of them. He then went to see what was on at the airport café, and noticed the TV was on. Unfortunately it was summer, and there were no football matches on show, just the odd soap or drama. Arthur went to buy a cup of coffee and went to sit in a quiet corner. He then thought about contacting Henry. Did he have enough credit to tell him everything that had happened to him in the past week, he thought to himself? In the end, he decided to give Henry a brief call.

"Hello, Henry Retono, here," came the answer on Arthur's mobile.

"Hello, Major, it's me professor Wagstaff," he replied.

"Well hello professor, or should I call you Arthur?" said Henry. "What

happened to you this week? I thought you were going to contact me from California?"

"Oh a lot happened," Arthur said to him "Too much to tell in one call, I'm afraid. Did you hear about the Governor of California?"

"What, about the attempted assassination?" asked Henry. "I was beginning to think you'd been taken in for custody for the shooting."

"Well, it was a little more complicated than that," said Arthur.

"You mean to say you were charged with his attempted murder?!" asked Henry.

"Oh no, no, no," Arthur replied. "It was nothing like that, I'm pleased to say. The popular assumption is that it was the Governor who was to be assassinated. In truth, it was somebody completely different."

"How do you know that?" asked Henry.

"Because it was me who disturbed the assassin," Arthur told him.

"And how did you do that, may I ask?" queried Henry. "You didn't climb onto the stanchion and freeze the chap, before pushing him off? If the cops find your fingerprints on the assassin's clothes, you could be in trouble."

"No, no, it wasn't like that," said Arthur. "I had to use my force."

"I thought I instructed everyone here not to use the force, unless in a very special emergency," Henry said to him.

"This was an emergency," said Arthur. "The person who was to be assassinated was the former Astronomer-in-Chief at NASA."

"Was he a friend that you made over there, this former Astronomer-in-Chief at NASA?" asked Henry.

"You could say that," was Arthur's reply. "In actual fact, he was the chief at NASA when that space craft came to destroy the Interstellar Pilgrim."

"So what did you find out about that spacecraft, the shuttle, I believe," queried Henry.

"Well, he was basically acting on instructions from above," Arthur pointed out.

"From the president, you mean?" an ever-more interested Henry queried.

"Yes, basically, and from the Secretary for Defence," said Arthur. "What's more, the chap was rather suspicious of the 'pilgrim. He had received reports that it had been travelling at over 1 million miles per hour, and had been checking it's course since the pilgrim entered the inner solar system."

"Did you find out much more from this chap?" asked Henry.

"Oh quite a bit more, actually," Arthur told him. "I'm afraid I haven't much

credit on my mobile, so I'll have to tell you all of this another time."

"Oh? Like when?" asked Henry.

"Well, I'm hoping to come along and visit you all next weekend," said Arthur. "I can tell you everything then. Oh, and I may have some business coming your way."

"What sort of business?" asked Henry.

"About your motor manufacturing business," said Arthur. "You are still continuing with the business, I presume?"

"Of course," replied Henry.

"How is the business coming along, by the way?" asked Arthur.

"Not too bad," Henry told him. "We are getting a few inquiries each week, which are steadily increasing. We may be on a special environmental edition of Top Gear."

"Top Gear?!" exclaimed Arthur. "That's probably the most un-environmental programme on TV."

"This edition will be especially for non-petrol motors," Henry re-emphasised. "We're designing a digital sports car. I think Clarkson will be impressed when he sees it."

"Well I'll wish you luck," said Arthur. "You can tell me all about it next weekend."

"I'll look forward to seeing you then," Henry said to Arthur, before he put the phone down.

Arthur continued to wander about the airport, stopping here and there for a rest, and for the odd drink and snack. He considered going to stay with Dermot a couple of times, but each time decided this was not really worth it. In the end, Arthur fell asleep on the chairs at the airport. They didn't seem too bad, and probably better than in the hibernation unit on the Interstellar Pilgrim.

Arthur caught his flight back to Tenerife the next morning, and brought his car with him. Once he finally arrived home, he didn't feel like doing much, and fell asleep again.

He woke up a little earlier than usual on Monday morning, and went to work feeling a little better. He spoke to Dermot, to arrange a few days away on Friday and the following Monday. When Arthur said he would help to get the digital car for him, Dermot said he needn't book any leave, and that he'd authorise the time off on business.

Arthur then arranged a flight for Friday, to Leeds/Bradford airport, and told Henry about this. It was just after 3pm on Friday when Arthur walked

into the arrivals lounge, when he saw a familiar lad who had come to pick him up.

Lucas waived to Arthur, to let him know he was there. Arthur waived back, as he walked over to him.

"Hello, Professor Wagstaff," Lucas said to him. "How is Tenerife treating you, these days?"

"Oh splendid, splendid," Arthur replied. "Warmth and sunshine all year round, clear skies, which are perfect for observing the stars. I couldn't have asked for much more. Mind you, I'm not too keen on driving home from the observatory at night."

"Why's that?" Lucas asked.

"Well, the observatory is about 8000 feet above sea level," Arthur told him. "The roads aren't too large and have many twists and turns, with some steep drops in places."

"Oh I see," said Lucas, as he and Arthur walked towards the luggage conveyor belt.

"I sometimes spend the night up at the observatory, particularly when it's already the next morning," said Arthur.

"What do you do all that time up there?" Lucas asked Arthur, with a grin on his face.

"Merely watching the night sky," Arthur replied, though he could see what Lucas may have been alluding to. "I quite like relaxing to a bottle of sangria – I've brought a couple of bottles along with me."

"I don't suppose they have much tea or coffee in Tenerife," Lucas queried.

"Too hot I suppose?"

"True, but the reason probably has more to do with the fact that they don't have much natural water," Arthur explained. "There aren't any rivers on Tenerife, or the other Canary Islands, come to that. There is the odd beck, but they're usually dry, except when it rains. Everyone has bottled water."

"They ought to develop a desalination plant," suggested Lucas. "Purify the sea water, and 'feed' it into a reservoir."

"I've thought about that myself," said Arthur. "It's not too popular at the moment, as they may create more greenhouse gasses."

"But Tenerife is an island, for goodness sake," said Lucas. "They don't have to use fossil fuels, just the resources of the sea. It could eventually lower sea levels, or at least maintain the sea's current level."

"I know, I know," said Arthur. "I've thought of proposing the suggestion – trouble is the government is a thousand miles away in Madrid."

"Isn't there a local government in the archipeligo?" asked Lucas.

"There are two, in fact, though how much authority they have I'm not too sure at the moment," said Arthur. "How's the business coming along over here? Have you sold many cars yet?"

"Well, we're not inundated with orders but they are coming through in dribs and drabs," Lucas told him. "I'm sure we'll sell a few more after we've been on Top Gear."

"Ah yes, Henry was telling me about that," said Arthur, while he was watching for his luggage.

"It doesn't matter too much that we don't have many orders, as we haven't a large workforce, resources, or many overheads," Lucas explained. "Only the replicator."

"Just make sure no-one sees you or any of the others with that thing," Arthur advised.

"Don't worry, no-one will see us," said Lucas. "You haven't seen our 'factory' yet, have you?"

"The one on the outskirts of Skipton, you mean?" asked Arthur.

"That's the one," said Lucas. "I suppose Henry, or the Major as we like to call him, told you about it."

Arthur didn't reply immediately, as he was picking up his luggage.

"I think Henry took me to see it once, just before I started my job in Tenerife," he then said. "Is Henry waiting in the car?"

"He's in his office this afternoon," Lucas told him. "Ramondo is waiting in the car. We can take you to see the Major and the factory."

They then walked over to the Arrivals exit, after which Lucas led Arthur to the car park, and Ramondo, who was in the waiting car. It wouldn't take long to get to Skipton, just about half an hour, during which time Arthur told Lucas and Ramondo all about his trip to Hollywood. It was just gone 3 o'clock when they arrived at the factory.

"I can see the factory has been done-up since I last saw the place," Arthur said to the lads as he looked around the premises. "I can see you've got windows at the very top of the building – are they what I think they are?"

"Panels for solar energy," emphasised Ramondo. "That would be ideal for where you are."

"Indeed it would, indeed it would. We'd be guaranteed energy without the use of fossil fuels, in the Canaries'," said Arthur. "I think I'm going to have to get myself onto the local council."

Lucas then went to open the door to the premises and led Arthur to

Henry's office, while Ramondo locked the car door.

"Hello, come in, come in," Henry said to Arthur as he opened the office door. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"I wouldn't mind a cup of tea and some biscuits," Arthur requested. "I do have a cup or two now and then, but it costs an arm and a leg in Tenerife. Plus it's too hot to drink tea over there."

"Lucas, go and fetch a teapot, some cups and biscuits, there's a good lad," instructed Henry. "And close the door behind you."

"I see you've got a nice office all of your own," Arthur then said to Henry.

"Not bad, is it," Henry replied. "Better than the flight deck of the 'Pilgrim' – I can enjoy a little more privacy."

"Yes indeed," said Arthur.

"So, how was the convention?" Henry then asked him.

"Very eventful, thanks," Arthur replied. "I made a few new friends as well."

"Yes, you were telling me last week," said Henry. "Did you get home from the airport okay in the end?"

"All's well that ended well, as they say," said Arthur. "I don't think I had a proper chance to tell you, but my governor wanted to go to Hollywood."

"Understandable, I suppose, as you weren't far away," said Henry. "How was Hollywood? Did you see any stars, movie stars, I mean."

"We caught a glimpse of a couple, here and there," Arthur told him.

"Did you get any autographs?" Henry asked. "Like Cindy Crawford, perhaps?"

"No such luck, I'm afraid," said Arthur, "though we did see Sylvester thing-a-my-jig, and Bruce what's-his-face."

"Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, you mean?" Henry queried.

"Yes that's them," said Arthur.

"How about Arnie?" Henry asked. "You must have seen Arnie, I suppose."

"Oh yes, he was at the convention," Arthur told him. "He didn't get to say a lot, though, apart from a few introductions at the convention."

"You were telling me last week that you didn't think it was the Governor of California who was going to be assassinated," Henry then queried.

"Yes indeed," replied Arthur. "The target was actually one of the chaps sitting a few seats away from me."

"How can you be so sure?" Henry asked him. "All reports say the target was the Governor of California."

"Ah yes, that's what we all want the world to believe," Arthur told him.

"The real target was actually the former Astronomer-in-Chief at NASA."

"And how do you know that?" asked Henry.

"He was sitting a few seats away from me – Frank, was his name," replied Arthur, as he tried to think of Frank's full name. "Professor Marshall, Professor Frank Marshall - that was his name."

"Was he one of your new-found friends?" Henry asked.

"Yes as a matter of fact," replied Arthur. "He was in charge at NASA when that shuttle was sent to destroy the Interstellar Pilgrim. They weren't his instructions directly, though."

"Did the President give the instructions?" asked Henry.

"Indirectly," Arthur told him. "The Secretary for Defence was the main chap in charge of all that, though I think the President was behind it all somewhere."

"I suppose if we saw what seemed like an asteroid hurtling towards us, we'd do the same thing," Henry muttered.

"Of course," said Arthur. "Anyway, that's not half the story."

"Oh," said Henry. "So what reasons did someone want to assassinate the former Astronomer-in Chief of NASA?"

"Well, he told me that he was offered a golden retirement," Arthur told him.

"Why, how old was he?" queried Henry.

"Frank was fifty-two at the time," said Arthur.

"It's not really that unusual for someone to retire at that age, though," said Henry. "Especially those in senior positions. Perhaps he wanted to retire."

"That's just it," said Arthur. "Frank never even considered retiring. He was offered a golden retirement on condition that he closed the case of the oncoming asteroid."

"The Interstellar Pilgrim, you mean?" queried Henry.

"Yes indeed," replied Arthur. "Frank had always been suspicious of the asteroid, particularly as it had been travelling much, much faster than your normal asteroid."

"So how much was he offered to retire?" asked Henry.

"He wouldn't say," said Arthur. "I tried to read his mind at the time and could see 5 million dollars, but I don't know for certain. Oh, by the way, he asked me, Dermot and Clint never to say anything about it."

"Dermot's your chief at the European Space Agency, isn't he?" queried Henry, trying to fathom who Arthur was referring to. "Who's Clint? Was he another friend you met at the convention?"

"Yes," Arthur told him. "He was Frank's friend and agreed to come along with him. You'll never guess where they met?"

"At NASA?" queried Henry.

"Clint was called in by NASA to train for the space-shuttle," Arthur told him. "He was actually the man who fired the missiles towards the Interstellar Pilgrim."

"How do you know he couldn't have been the assassin?" asked Henry.

"Because he was sitting beside Frank," explained Arthur. "Besides, they caught the attempted-assassin."

"That's no guarantee," said Henry. "They claim to have caught the man who shot JFK, but it's suspected that there were others lurking around the place at the time who have never been caught."

"If Clint was going to shoot Frank he'd have done it a long while ago, certainly in the past year," Arthur commented. "Besides, Frank asked all of us to keep this a secret."

"There were other factors why Frank was to be assassinated," said Arthur.

Just then, as he was about to expand on this, they heard a knock on the door. Arthur went to open it, and Lucas brought in a tray of tea and biscuits. Henry thanked Lucas, before he left and closed the door.

"So, tell me, you had a little business to put my way?" Henry then queried.

"Dermot asked if he could have a car like mine," Arthur explained. "He was very pleased and surprised how well the car handled, particularly when I drove out of San Bernardino and into the hills of California."

"Oh, I had thought you had a full order," said Henry.

"I may do later on," said Arthur. "If Dermot can drive his car around Paris, you may have some interest from France."

"Did he want one like yours?" Henry asked.

"If you have a sporty model, I think he'd prefer one of those," replied Arthur.

"That shouldn't be a problem," said Henry. "We can charge him a bit more for a sporty model."

"How much do you think it will cost?" Arthur asked.

"About £20,000.00, I should think," said Henry. "Do you know how much he'd be prepared to pay for it?"

"I'm not sure really," said Arthur. "The price of some of today's sports cars are extortionate. You could charge quite a bit, as Dermot will probably have it paid by the European Space Agency."

"I don't think that's right," said Henry. "I don't approve of top bosses who pay for things through company expenses."

"I shouldn't worry about that," commented Arthur. "Dermot is Director of Development, so much of his interest in the car is to develop something

for future ESA missions to the Moon and Mars.”

“What? To take as a vehicle to drive along the planet?” asked Henry.

“Yes, that’s the idea,” replied Arthur.

“I’ll take you along to see the model, before we go home,” Henry said to him as he picked up his cup of tea.

“Good idea,” said Arthur. “I might fancy the model myself. Who knows, you may even sell another car.”

“Why? Would you be interested in buying one?” Henry asked. “With all due respect, you’re not exactly the sort of person I’d imagine driving a sports car.”

“Just because I’m not a teenage tearaway doesn’t mean to say I wouldn’t fancy a sports car of my own,” replied Arthur. “Oh yes, there’s something else I ought to tell you.”

“Oh, what’s that?” Henry queried. “Do you have more business to put my way?”

“Yes, there’s that as well,” said Arthur. “What I mean to say is that I told them about the Interstellar Pilgrim.”

Henry coughed with an almighty surprise, spurring his tea out onto the table. He was very annoyed.

“I don’t suppose you approve,” Arthur mumbled to him apologetically.

“I gave clear instructions nobody from the ‘Pilgrim was to let-on our true identities or where we came from. And that included you!” shouted Henry.

“What the bloody hell were you thinking of?”

“I only told Dermot, Frank and Clint,” said Arthur. “I didn’t broadcast it to the whole of the convention when I was on stage.”

“I don’t care if you told Fido, Mutley or Nellie the Elephant!” Henry told Arthur. “Under absolutely no circumstances was anyone from the Interstellar Pilgrim to tell of our identities and origin.”

“I don’t think we need worry about this,” said Arthur. “I know a secret about Frank as well, don’t forget, so he won’t say anything. It wouldn’t be in his interest to do so, anyway. Even if he did tell about this, he’d probably be laughed at, and the US military, or someone high up, would order him to be shot, more than likely.”

“What about Clint or Dermot?” asked Henry.

“Clint wouldn’t say anything – he’s almost as implicated in all this as Frank,” replied Arthur. “Besides, Clint’s a rather quiet man, who usually tries to keep out of the limelight. Dermot wouldn’t say anything either. He knows that if NASA, or even the Russian Space Federation, found out about me they’d try and get me to work for them instead.”

Henry thought to himself for a moment.

"Besides, I could have erased this from their memories, if I wanted to," pointed out Arthur. "I can still do it if you want me to."

"No, no, no, we'll leave it this time," agreed Henry. "But under absolutely no circumstances are you to tell anyone on this planet, or anything for that matter, about our identities. Do I make myself clear??"

"Perfectly, Henry," said Arthur.

"You inferred in all that that you may have some more business for me?" Henry queried.

"Yes, indeed," said Arthur. "Frank and Dermot, and Clint to a lesser extent, were interested in my car, with a view to developing a similar motor in the USA."

Henry just looked at Arthur and asked him to elaborate.

"Well, they don't have the sort of money to build a new factory, with the machines and resources to manufacture digital cars in volume, not even with Frank's pay-off," Arthur explained.

"You didn't tell them your car was manufactured by the replicator, I hope?" queried Henry.

"Oh no, I didn't tell them about the replicator," replied Arthur. "As far as they're aware, my digital car was built in a factory like every other car."

"Good. Let's keep it that way," said Henry. "Didn't Clint get a pay-off as well?"

"Yes, but I don't think it was as big as the one Frank received," said Arthur. "Besides, he didn't leave any clues when I tried to read his mind. We all agreed that they needed the backing of someone senior, who supported the environment."

"I doubt you'd find many people like that in the USA," said Henry. "Mind you, the Governor of California was supposed to have green credentials."

"Yes indeed," said Arthur. "I used the force to inform him about the digital car, and to give him Frank and Dermot's addresses and other details. That way he could contact them."

"How much do your friends know about the car?" asked Henry.

"Everything, other than we used the replicator to make it," Arthur told him.

"When the Governor of California contacts Frank or Dermot, they'll let me know about it, and we can go to California to demonstrate the car to the 'Governor.'"

"And with his backing, plus a little finance along the way, they could develop a totally new market," Henry acknowledged.

"Yes indeed," said Arthur. "And the Governor of California is probably the

best person to advertise the idea.”

“But how will this bring business to me?” queried Henry.

“Well, first of all, you can supply one of the cars – a sports car should do perfectly,” said Arthur. “If the idea takes off in California, it should take off here as well. Plus Dermot will be driving another digital car in Paris. As they say in the supermarket, every little helps.”

Henry then passed his mobile to Arthur, which had a picture of a new sports car.

“What do you think of it?” Henry asked.

“Not bad, not bad at all,” said Arthur. “Is this the finished model?”

“No not yet, I’m afraid,” said Henry. “This is the basic design we’ve come up with. The problem has been coming up with a new design – it seemed whatever we did to the original design, it ended up looking like one car or another that’s already out there.”

“I take your point,” said Arthur. “This looks a rather like one of those Opel Tigra’s.”

“Vauxhall Tigra’s, here in the UK,” Henry pointed out. “We have amended the sides of the car, the badge on the front is different, and the cabriolet roof has been updated, but otherwise it’s basically a Tigra.”

Arthur then left the mobile on the desk, while he went to pick up cup of his tea.

“You can keep the mobile phone,” Henry said to Arthur.

“Are you sure?” Arthur asked.

“You may as well,” said Henry. “It runs on solar power, a bit like calculators did on Earth twenty years ago, apparently.”

“That’s not a problem, is it?” Arthur queried.

“No, only that we don’t get enough sunshine in the UK,” replied Henry.

“Take the mobile – it’s bound to operate better where you are, as you get a lot more sun than we do here.”

“Oh, thanks,” said a jolly Arthur. “Have you decided on a name for your motor business yet?”

“We haven’t come to a final decision as yet, but we were going to have a vote on it this weekend,” said Henry. “You’re welcome to be involved in the vote.”

“Are there any names up for suggestion?” Arthur asked.

“We considered giving the company a galactic name at first,” said Henry.

“When we thought it over though, we found some names are in use, like Galaxy and Orion, and Universal has been used as a name for other companies in the past.”

"How about names like Stellar or Cosmic?" Arthur suggested. "What about Henry's Motors?"

"I've thought about that, but apparently one of the early car pioneers was called Henry, Henry Ford I believe," explained Henry. "Why don't you put your suggestions forward at the meeting. I know some of the others will have a suggestion or two."

"Is it being held anywhere special?" asked Arthur.

"Not really, unless you put the Ribblehead Inn in that class," said Henry.

"We're all going there on Saturday night."

"Hhmmm, I may come along," Arthur replied unconvincingly.

"Don't you want to come along?" Henry queried. "Wouldn't you like a night out with the lads? You haven't seen us for months."

"You wouldn't mind if I gave it a miss?" asked Arthur. "It's just that I spent enough time last week drinking until the early hours."

"Oh I see, you've found other friends now," Henry commented. "You're not one of the lads anymore, eh?"

"To be honest, I was never one of the lads," replied Arthur. "I'm more than pleased to see you, and I have brought business your way, but I just don't think I could cope 'til the early hours."

"The Ribblehead Inn is in the wilderness of Yorkshire, or had you forgotten?" said Henry. "This isn't California, you now. The place closes at 11.00."

"Oh that's alright then," said Arthur. "But I'm not going to drink a lot. When did you say the sports car should be ready?"

"In a few weeks time," replied Henry. "I hope you haven't pre-booked a flight to take home any large cargo."

"No," Arthur told him. "Can you let me know in advance when the car's ready, so I can arrange to pick it up."

"I'll let you know in a few weeks," said Henry. "We should have a final date by then. Actually, I was thinking you might like to bring Dermot along with you next time."

"You don't mind?" Arthur queried.

"Not really," said Henry. "I'd quite like to meet him actually. I'd like to get to know the bloke, especially as he's carrying a very important secret of ours."

"You mean about the Interstellar Pilgrim?" Arthur queried.

"Yes, amongst other things," emphasised Henry, before finishing his tea and looking up at the clock in his office. "Come on Arthur, when you've finished your cup, I'll take you downstairs to see our new sports car."

Arthur finished his cup and walked out the room, with Henry switching off the light and locking the door behind him. Henry then led Arthur through the passageway and down some stairs until they entered a large room, where the model of the sports car lay.

"Hhmm, my, my," muttered Arthur. "Pretty snazzy, eh? What seems to be the problem in completing the model?"

"We want to make this into a new car," said Henry. "We're trying to adjust the engine and bodywork, so as no manufacturer can claim we're copying their models"

"Yes, that is a bit of a problem, isn't it," said Arthur. "Do you think it will be ready in a few weeks?"

"Probably, but I wouldn't like to guarantee a final date," Henry replied.

"These things are almost as important as manufacturing the car itself."

"Have you thought about building a manufacturing plant within the building?" asked Arthur.

"I have thought about that, just in case someone wants to come and visit our premises," said Henry. "Particularly as Top Gear are coming to see one of our cars."

"What the sports car?" Arthur queried.

"That wasn't what they arranged to come to view and test, but knowing the Top Gear team, I'd bet they'd like to drive a sporty car," said Henry. "It may give us a head start over the other non-petrol cars they may view."

"It looks rather plush inside," said Arthur. "Can I get inside?"

Henry pressed his fob to unlock the doors, after which Arthur went inside to have a good look around.

"Is it powered by 6 large micro chips?" asked Arthur.

"7 actually," said Henry. "We've given it another gear, but the principal is the same as our other cars."

"Do they also supply power to the electrics and ventilation?" Arthur asked.

"Actually we've designed a new power supply for those parts of the car," said Henry.

"Oh?" Arthur muttered. "Whereabouts is the power supply?"

"Look up at the sun roof," Henry said to Arthur.

As Arthur looked at the sunroof he could see a small box at the back of it, with a covered wire leading into the top surface and the frame of the roof.

"That stores solar-power," Henry explained. "We had wanted to develop the whole car to run on solar energy, but we don't get enough sunlight in this country, even in the summer."

"I know just the place a solar powered car would be perfect for," replied

Arthur.

"Where's that?" Henry asked. "Tenerife?"

"Definitely," said Arthur, "It would be absolutely perfect in California, and Florida, too. We can suggest that to Frank when he sets up the new plant, in conjunction with the Governor of California."

"I thought you said you were still waiting to hear about the idea?" queried Henry.

"It's just a matter of time," said Arthur, as he tried out some more of the electrics inside the car.

Arthur was about to switch on the CD player, when a ditty could be heard coming from the mobile phone which Henry had given to him.

"I think you'd better answer that," Henry suggested as Arthur looked up at him

"Hello, Professor Arthur Wagstaff, how can I help?" he then announced on the mobile phone.

“Hi Professor,” said Ramondo on the other end of the call. “Can you tell the Major that Lucas and Madaly are checking the building, and are due to lock the premises in the next 10 minutes.”

“Oh, thank you for letting me know,” replied Arthur. “The Major’s here with me, if you’d like a word with him.”

“No, that’s okay,” said Ramondo. “If you and the Major are looking at our sports car for a little longer, can you let Lucas know you’re still in the building. I’ll be waiting for you both in my car.”

Arthur then looked up at Henry, telling the Major what Ramondo had said.

“Don’t worry just yet,” Henry replied. “I’ve got some keys for when we need to get out. If you’re going to buy this sports car, you’d better have a good look at it. Let me know when you’re satisfied with the car.”

“Oh I’ve looked at most of the interior and electrics,” Arthur told him. “If the engine is anything like my current vehicle, I’ve got a good idea how it all works. We may as well get going, particularly if the others will be waiting for us.”

“Oh, it’ll only be Ramondo waiting in the car,” Henry told Arthur. “Lucas and Madaly now reside here.”

“Where, in this building?” queried Arthur.

“Yes, on the top floor,” replied Henry. “We designed some separate rooms, with all mod-cons inside.”

“I suppose they act like security guards,” said Arthur.

“Precisely,” said Henry. “If they hear any disturbance they should call the police immediately. I’m not going to risk anyone breaking into the building and discovering our secrets. Not at any price.”

Henry then looked at his watch.

“While we’re here, do you want to discuss how much you’re prepared to pay for the car?” he asked Arthur.

“Not really,” said Arthur. “We can do that later.”

“Okay then we may as well get a move on,” said Henry, before he locked the car, led Arthur out of the room and locked the door. As they went down the stairs, they waved goodbye to Madaly, who was coming to lock the premises, before leaving.

On the way back to Ribblehead Cottages, Henry & Arthur discussed the new sports car and how much it would cost. They agreed this to be £25,000, though they both realised that it was worth more. They accepted that to market the car, it may be beneficial to sell this at a reduced price. In any case, it didn’t cost a lot to manufacture.

Arthur went along to the meeting at The Ribblehead Inn, the following

evening. A few design amendments for the new sports car were agreed. After much debate, it was also agreed that the new brand of motor manufacturer would be entitled Major. Several suggestions were made as to the name the new sports car, which was eventually agreed to be called the Green Machine. Now all that was left was to design the new logo and gain recognised status for the new company. But could it all be done in a few weeks, on top of which the Top Gear team were due to visit the Skipton factory the following month.

The Green Revolution Begins

The sports car was ready the following weekend. Checks still had to be carried out, and after it was given the all-clear, it was arranged for Dermot to come and collect it the weekend after that. Arthur flew to Paris to meet Dermot, before they flew together to Leeds. Henry went to the airport to meet them, before taking them to Ribbleshead Cottage.

While he was there, Dermot said how impressed he had been with Arthur's digital car. He said it was out of this world, expecting Henry to tell him all about journeys through the universe. Henry noticed this however, and while they were talking, Henry stared at Dermot in a particular way. Dermot mumbled something for a second, but had by now totally forgotten what he was going to ask. After thirty seconds or so, Dermot had forgotten all that Arthur had told him at the convention.

Henry then began to discuss the price of the digital car, and suggested Dermot take the car for a test drive. Henry and Lucas went along with him, in case anything went wrong, but as expected, everything was fine. On their return, Dermot agreed to purchase the digital car, and wrote a cheque for £25000.

Dermot stayed at Ribbleshead cottage overnight, and made good friends with Henry. Dermot did talk a lot, and often referred to the cosmos, which worried Henry a little, though he never asked Henry where he came from, or even mentioned the renegade asteroid.

Henry raised this with Arthur, concerned whether his 'focus' had worked, but Arthur said it was just Dermot's character to chatter. Besides, he was employed by the European Space Agency, so was naturally interested in the cosmos.

Dermot didn't stay long the following day, as he drove back to Paris. He would probably have had to go to Heathrow or Gatwick to get his new car picked up, so decided to drive instead. Arthur went along with him.

It took longer than anticipated to get the new company recognised, however. In the meantime, Arthur received a particular call on his mobile while at work one day.

“Hello there, is Professor Arthur Wagstaff available?” asked the voice on the other end of the mobile.

“Yes, thank you, Professor Wagstaff speaking,” said Arthur. “How can I help?”

“Oh hi, it’s Professor Frank Marshall here,” was the reply. “I’m sure you remember me from the convention last month. How are you getting along at work? Discovered any new planets lately?”

“Not really,” replied Arthur. “We’re currently trying to observe the recognised solar system, to see if any small asteroids may be lurking about.”

“Are you in search of that asteroid which seemed to disappear recently?” queried Frank.

“Yes as a matter of fact,” said Arthur. “I have noticed a tiny asteroid which does look rather similar orbiting within the asteroid belt, but we’re going to have to search the whole solar system as far out as the Kuyper belt. I don’t really think we can take this investigation beyond that point.”

“It sounds like you have a large job on your hands,” commented Frank.

“Anyway, I rang to tell you that I’ve just heard from the Governor of California.”

“Oh good, good,” said Arthur. “What did he say?”

“He said he’d seen a web-site about a project to construct newly-powered cars,” Frank told him. “He couldn’t recall the web-site address, but could recall instructions to contact me on my mobile.”

“Do you know if that was the file I sent to you?” asked Arthur. “You know, the one with the car on the front, with pages of some of the car’s details attached.”

“I’m not sure if that was the one he was referring to,” replied Frank. “It seemed pretty similar, though I don’t think it was the same one.”

“Good, good,” said Arthur. “I think Henry and his lads must have set up a site of their own. Did you tell him that we didn’t have the funding to fully develop the idea?”

“Yes, that’s what I told him,” said Frank. “The Governor’ sounded quite impressed with the idea, and said it shouldn’t be a problem. However, before he’s prepared to invest in any project, he’d like to have a good look at the vehicle.”

"That shouldn't be a problem," Arthur suggested. "I'll contact Henry and let him know. We can then make some arrangements."

"Will you be taking the new model vehicle to California?" asked Frank.

"Probably," said Arthur. "I'll sort this out first and let you know if the Governor will have to travel to the UK. Do you know how urgently the Governor wants to view the new model car, or can he wait a little while?"

"Is there a problem?" Frank queried. "I don't think the Governor likes to be kept waiting. He has a busy schedule."

"There shouldn't be a problem," said Arthur. "Try to get a firm date from the Governor, or would you like me to speak to him?"

"I'll speak to him," Frank insisted. "He's expecting to hear from me anyway."

"I'll bet you never thought this whole idea would ever get off the ground?" Arthur said to Frank.

"Well, I've learned never to dismiss things out of hand," replied Frank.

"Especially after that asteroid, or whatever it was. Which reminds me, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"I can't say too much at the moment, I'm afraid," said Arthur, who could guess what Frank was about to ask him. "You may want to call me in a few hours time. I'll be at home then. I may have a bit more information for you by then, as well."

When Arthur left work that afternoon, he contacted Henry on his new mobile from outside the observatory. He found it easier to make contact from here as it was high upon the dormant volcano of Mount Teide.

He told Henry that the California project was now beginning, and that the Governor wanted to see the new vehicles for himself. Henry said he could make arrangements with some of his team to go to California. They had no major commitments and so could fly out at any time which may be convenient. He asked Arthur to arrange a meeting on a date suitable to the Governor, with a week's notice so they could arrange to take the new model vehicle along.

Henry and Arthur agreed that the plan for a solar-powered vehicle would be a good suggestion to put forward to the Governor, so Henry would email the plans to Arthur, to send to the Governor of California.

After Arthur arrived at his home in Tenerife, he expected a call from Frank, though to his surprise, he hadn't heard from him by that evening. The following evening, however, Frank called.

"Hi, is that Professor Arthur Wagstaff?" he asked.

"Oh hello, that's Professor Frank Marshall, isn't it," said Arthur. "I've got some positive news for you, and for the Governor of California."

"Oh good," said Frank. "Will you be coming to California?"

"Probably," replied Arthur. "The manager of the project, Henry, says he should be free most of the time, so we can make arrangements to suit the Governor. We'll have to arrange transportation of the new model vehicle, so he may have to wait another week or so."

"I'll let the Governor know. What if he wants to see the vehicle sooner?" Frank then asked.

"He's always free to fly to the UK to visit the site," Arthur suggested. "The premises are in Yorkshire, so there may be an additional trek from Heathrow. If he'd prefer to do that could you let me know?"

"I'll see what I can arrange," said Frank. "You don't mind if I ask, but do you think it may be easier if I spoke to Henry?"

"Possibly, but I shouldn't worry for now," said Arthur. "When this whole project gets off the ground, I'm sure you'll have plenty of opportunity to speak to Henry. And to the Governor of California, I hope. Who knows, he may make you Managing Director."

Frank just laughed, as he didn't know what else he should really do.

"No, really," Arthur insisted. "If you play your cards right, you may get to run the business. You'll be the best-placed person for the role. It's not as if you haven't run anything else before."

Frank thought to himself for a few seconds.

"As I recall, in San Bernardino you said that you were from that asteroid," he queried.

"That is correct," said Arthur.

"I presume Henry's from the same place, too?" Frank asked.

"That is correct," Arthur said again. "You needn't worry about him though - Henry's not some Jabba the Hutt."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Frank.

"He's no Yoda or Chewbecca, either," Arthur added. "He's like many people on the planet. You should get the opportunity to meet him soon."

"Didn't you say something about your ancestors originally coming from Earth, and that they left the planet as an asteroid approached?" Frank then asked.

"Yes, that's what I believe happened," Arthur told him. "That's what I've read, though what happened was a long, long time ago."

"About 65 million years ago, at the time of the Cretaceous mass extinction?" Frank queried.

"I believe so, though I can't be absolutely sure," said Arthur. "What happened afterwards is unclear."

"You don't suppose they may have been from the Juraasic mass extinction, or the Triaassic' even?" asked Frank.

"I doubt it very much," replied Arthur. "While I was on the asteroid, we managed to pick up the world wide web as we approached Earth. We debated this issue and came up with a calculation that suggested our ancestors departed the planet around 65 million years ago."

"Do you know whereabouts on the planet these people lived?" asked Frank.

"I believe something was mentioned about an ice-land, away from monsters," recalled Arthur. "I should imagine they lived around the north or south poles."

"But no human fossils have ever been discovered dating back that far," said Frank.

"That's probably because their fossils are buried somewhere at the bottom of the ocean," replied Arthur. "And that's if the fossils have not already merged into limestone, under the intense ocean pressure. Don't forget, Antarctica will not have been in the same position it is in now when they left this planet."

"Do you have any idea where they went to after that?" asked Frank.

"Not really, we had no records to go on for quite some time after that," said Arthur. "I think the people will have been more concerned in building a new life. They possibly tried to settle on Mars until they developed spacecraft to travel at fast speeds. I know there was reference to a few crafts going their own ways eventually."

"Have you noticed any more asteroids?" Frank asked.

"I haven't seen anymore similar to the one which is no longer orbiting Earth" queried Arthur. "I think I mentioned yesterday that there is one in the asteroid belt, between Mars and Jupiter, which looks very much like it."

"Do you think that's the one you're searching for?" asked Frank.

"Probably," replied Arthur.

"Do you think they may be up to something, while they're lurking there?" asked Frank.

"I would surmise that they may be assessing Mars, with a view to settling there," said Arthur. "I believe a comet smashed into the planet sometime last year. It probably went unnoticed, as that asteroid was approaching Earth at the time."

"We didn't notice anything from Earth," said Frank.

"It didn't cause a great eruption," Arthur told him. "Mars is mainly composed of Iron and ferric compounds. When water impacts with that sort of surface, the iron is likely to oxidise."

"Which is why the planet is a rusty red," commented Frank.

"They may also be watching this planet from a safe distance," Arthur suggested. "They may even be waiting for the next mass extinction, before re-colonising Earth."

"They may have a long wait," said Frank.

"It may not be as long as you imagine," replied Arthur. "The way this planet is going, it's not likely to remain the same for very much longer."

"They're not going to destroy Earth, I hope?" Frank asked, disturbingly.

"No, no, no," said Arthur. "They won't have to destroy Earth to create the next mass extinction. The people of today are making an excellent job of doing that themselves."

"We'll get things sorted," Frank replied.

"But when?" asked Arthur. "There are wars happening on different parts of the planet, for a start. Certain countries are trying to gain nuclear access. Other presidents may wish to use a nuclear missile, perhaps in Afghanistan, for instance."

"That may be the ideal event," Frank insisted. "It could wipe out the Taliban and their source of income in one exercise."

"It could start a nuclear war as well," emphasised Arthur. "You'd only need a band of terrorists to take over Pakistan or India, which already have nuclear missiles don't forget, and you'll end up with a nuclear war."

"Perhaps we need to use nuclear weapons to remind some people who's running this planet," said Frank.

"You're not fighting the same enemy as in World War Two," Arthur reminded him. "Today's warfare has no boundaries, nor is it determined by the colour of someone's skin. You can't assume everyone in Afghanistan, for example, supports the Taliban. Many people there hate them as much as we do."

"I take your point," said Frank reluctantly.

"And what about global warming?" asked Arthur. "The way things are going, you probably have another hundred years to survive, and even less if you want to do something serious about it."

"What about this project?" Frank asked. "This will help towards global warming, surely?"

"This is an excellent project, but it isn't going to happen overnight," Arthur pointed out. "Even then, it may only curb global warming at the current rate. The requirements of the growing industrial nations will make up for gains this project alone may have."

"There are other projects to combat global warming, all over the world, though," insisted Frank.

"Oh definitely," said Arthur. "However, they need to be co-ordinated, and we need certain nations, like the US, to lead the way, and to take the problem seriously. Thank goodness your current president is on his way out – let's hope his successor has a bit more foresight."

"We'll get by, one way or another," Frank insisted. "We're tougher and broader than you might think."

"And then if you manage to survive, or rather curtail violence and global warming, there's the third issue," said Arthur.

"What issue is that?" queried Frank.

"World population," Arthur replied. "Even I've noticed how much it has increased over the past two thousand years. It can't continue at the current rate."

"Man will survive that," said Frank. "We've survived every other catastrophe in that time."

"The rate at which the world's population is growing cannot continue at the same rate for the next two thousand years, if you make it that far," commented Arthur. "The world is full of urban jungles, and they're getting bigger all the time. One day there will not be enough land to accommodate everyone."

"If that day ever comes, we'll just have to build accommodation upwards," replied Frank.

"Yes, but will all other life forms survive?" asked Arthur. "The more land is used to build accommodation, the less land there will be for animals and agriculture. These sources will reduce and will not be able to meet the increasing world population. Especially if leaders like Mugabe desecrate fertile pastures."

"I accept your point, but that's a long way off," said Frank. "Besides, there are other sources of food, such as fish."

"Fish stocks have been reduced substantially in the past hundred years alone," Arthur pointed out. "Some fish are becoming depleted. You may think I'm some sort of a geek, portraying myself in a unique image in order to sell a project."

"I don't see you in that image," said Frank.

"Good, you should look at me as someone from the outside, looking in," said Arthur. "Admittedly, it's a challenge, but it's a challenge I'm willing to take."

"Do you have any other projects planned?" asked Frank.

"I have a few other ideas, but they're just at that stage at the moment," said Arthur. "I'm waiting to see what happens here. That may give me a good idea whether the others may be worth the effort."

"You sound like you may want to leave the planet?" Frank queried.

"It may not be possible," Arthur told him. "Some people might rather live in an asteroid, particularly if it prolongs their life. Personally however, I'd rather spend what time I have left here in the open, breathing fresh air, drinking fresh water and eating fresh food."

"You said you had other projects in the pipeline?" Frank queried.

"I do have a few other ideas, but I'd like to get this project off the ground first of all," Arthur said to him. "I'll pencil in a date of August 21st. Henry and I can fly over from the UK to LA. There's a bank holiday in the UK the following week, so Henry can stay there for a week to help with any queries with the cars. How does that sound?"

"That's fine by me," said Frank. "Why don't you come over to Colorado instead?"

"Colorado?" queried Arthur. "But that's hundreds of miles away."

"A thousand miles away, actually," Frank pointed out. "If you can't get to Colorado Springs, perhaps we could meet at Denver airport. It'll be an ideal opportunity for the car. We can see how well it travels for long distances."

"I'm not too sure," said Arthur. "I'll have to speak to Henry about that."

"Well how about if we arrange to meet the Governor of California in LA on August 25th. That will give us a few days to iron-out any problems."

Arthur wasn't too keen on the suggestion, but decided to go along with it. While they were talking, he could hear someone calling Frank at the other end.

"I'm afraid I'm in demand," said Frank. "I'm taking my wife out to lunch today."

"Going anywhere special?" asked Arthur.

"Just to a restaurant in town," said Frank. "I may take her to see a movie later, that's if she doesn't end up taking me shopping."

"I've heard women are good at that," said Arthur. "Anyway, have a nice time, whatever you end up doing. Cheerio."

The following day, Arthur confirmed the details to Henry, before contacting Frank to let him know that Henry agreed to his suggestion. Frank then notified the Governor of California to say that they'd meet him in LA on August 25th. After they had agreed a time and venue, Frank confirmed the details to Arthur, who passed them on to Henry.

Arthur now had other things on his mind. After he had seen Henry's premises in Skipton, he wanted to have solar panels installed into the roof of his house. He thought this would be an ideal way to save energy in Tenerife, where the sun shone daily. He looked on the internet, but couldn't find any businesses who installed solar panels, on Tenerife nor on any of the other Canary islands. He looked in the phone book, and contacted a few builders, but none of them installed solar panels either.

One day, while Arthur was speaking to Henry, he offered to send some of his team to do the job. Arthur was grateful for the offer, but decided to decline it for the moment. Instead Arthur looked online again, to see if there were any installers or builders in Morocco, but again, he couldn't find any.

Henry, on the other hand, knew what he wanted at this time. He had saved a copy of the proposed solar-powered car, and so printed the plans. After taking a good look at them, he then spoke to Lucas and Ramondo, to discuss how the plans could be adapted to the new sports car.

After a while, it was decided that perhaps the best option would be to enlarge the roof of the car slightly, which would be slightly hollow. This could allow a larger SEB, Solar-Energy Battery, to be fitted within it, to absorb the solar energy coming through the enlarged sunroof. The roof would also be fitted with smaller solar panels along it. The bottom, or inner, part of the roof would be silvery-white, to reflect the solar energy coming through the panels. Two covered wires would then be connected to the SEB, and would lead to the engine, in order to transfer the solar power.

Lucas fed the formula for the solar sports car into the large replicator, before he, Henry and Ramondo went in a truck to a scrap yard to pick up some unwanted vehicles. They then went to an obscure and disused quarry in upper Nidderdale.

"Do you think we'll be alright here, Major?" Ramondo asked Henry.

"Probably," he replied. "I don't see anyone here. The main valley road is around the corner. There's a farm a couple of miles up the road, but I shouldn't think anyone passing will look around here."

Henry looked around, to assess the situation for a moment. He then took a close look at the local map of the area, to see if there were any footpaths leading into or around the quarry. He then instructed Lucas to get the ramp from the truck, in order to let the vehicles off, while he took each set of keys.

"One of us will have to go to the edge of the quarry, make sure no vehicles end up here," said Henry.

Lucas and Ramondo looked at each other.

"I fed the formula into the replicator," said Lucas, as if to say he shouldn't be the lookout.

"I put the plan together," moaned Ramondo, not wishing to be the lookout, either.

"Alright, alright," said Henry. "I'll be the lookout. Now, sort yourselves out. If we're lucky, we may be able to produce two of these cars from the scrap."

Ramondo was holding the replicator, so decided he was going to use it first. Lucas picked up his mobile while Henry walked towards the slip road that led into the quarry. After he went around the corner he contacted Lucas, and asked him to make sure there were no ramblers approaching on the hills above.

Lucas said all was okay, before Henry looked around again, and when he felt it was safe, gave Ramondo the all-clear to use the replicator. Within a couple of minutes, the new solar powered sports car was completed.

Ramondo had a quick look around the car, to see if everything was fine and whether there may be anything out of place. When he was satisfied, he told Lucas, who gave the car a second look-over, before calling Henry.

"That looks pretty good to me," Henry said as he walked towards the new car, and then looked over the car. "It seems a bit out of place here in the dales."

"Why don't we take it for a test drive," suggested Lucas. "We're only about thirty miles from the M1."

Henry looked at the time on his watch.

"By the time we get to the M1, it'll be rush hour," he said.

"Besides, we can't use the car just yet," Ramondo added. "It doesn't have enough energy."

"Don't you want to try the car out first?" asked Lucas.

"We can do that tomorrow - while it's nice out, we'd best let it absorb the sunshine," said Henry before he turned to the others. "The weather forecast for tomorrow looks good, so we can give the new solar car a

test tomorrow. In the meantime, we may have time to replicate another car."

This time, Lucas replicated the model, and Ramondo went to the road, as a lookout. When the second car was replicated, they each checked over it, before Henry looked at his watch.

"Is that the time?" he said to himself. "Lucas – you can take the truck back to Skipton".

Henry then instructed Ramondo to winch the solar cars back up to the truck, while he put the replicator away. As they drove back down Nidderdale, Henry suggested to go to Ribbleshead instead, to drop the new cars off there.

"What about your own car, don't you want to pick it up at Skipton?" Ramondo queried.

"You can come with me to test one car tomorrow," Henry said to him. "If all goes well, you can pick up the other car tomorrow afternoon."

Lucas was quite happy to go to Ribbleshead, as he could see the others and have a swift half at the Ribbleshead Inn.

The next day was warm and sunny too. Henry had a close look at the solar car at about 8 am, and noticed that the sebo-meter, which effectively replaced the fuel gauge, was almost at halfway. When he went to look at it a few hours later, the sebo-meter had increased above the middle of the gauge, and so decided to take the car out for a spin with Ramondo.

The sun was still shining brightly as they drove towards Ingleton. They noticed that though they had been using the energy, the sebo-meter had increased slightly. The heat and sunlight more than compensated the little energy used. Henry decided that in order to gain more energy, they would take the scenic route towards the Forest of Bowland.

By the time they approached the M6 motorway, the sebo-meter was almost at the three-quarter mark. Before they got to the motorway junction, Henry turned off the main road and pulled up. He decided to let Ramondo drive along the motorway, so they exchanged seats, before setting off again. The sun was still shining, though there appeared a few more clouds coming into view, with the sebo-meter stagnant at the three quarter point.

As they travelled along the M6, the car seemed to handle well. After they drove for about ten minutes, Ramondo began to press his foot down on the accelerator. The car continued to handle in the same way as you would expect a 2-litre sports car, reaching 90 miles per hour easily. As

Ramondo was continually increasing the speed of the car, Henry suggested to slow down. He felt that they had proved the ability and performance of the car. He also noticed that the sebometer had reduced, suggesting that the amount of energy used to power the car was greater than the energy absorbed by the SEB.

By this time, they had passed the exit for Kendal, and could see the main railway line between London and Glasgow crisis-crossing the motorway. The hills in the distance grew larger and larger, and they noticed mountains beyond. At this point Henry looked at his road atlas, before checking if they had a copy of the appropriate ordnance survey map.

"Do you want me to take the next exit?" Ramondo asked him.

"Can you exit on the next junction after the next one coming up," instructed Henry.

"Do you want to stop off in Penrith?" Ramondo queried.

"No, not really," said Henry. "I think we should head the other way, towards the lakes. There are some good roads to practice on there."

"Not for a sports car, surely," said Ramondo.

"They're not ideal for a sports car at all," replied Henry. "That's why I want you to head for the Lake District."

"Whatever you insist," said Ramondo.

The exit off the M6 was a little way away, and as they continued, the sebometer slipped to the half-way point. Henry instructed Ramondo to drive between 60 and 70 miles per hour, to try and assess the ideal speed in which to use the least amount of energy necessary. Unfortunately, the further north they headed, the more clouds came into focus.

By the time they had exited the motorway, the sebometer had gone below the half-way point. The drive for the next ten miles or so was relatively easy-going, until they got closer to Ullswater. By now, much of the sky had cleared. It was on the lakeside that they agreed to take a halt, at a pub beside the lake. Ramondo didn't park the car near trees and bushes to give the car some shade, but in the open instead, in order to obtain the maximum sunlight. Henry and Ramondo then had an outdoor lunch with a few pints of beer to go with it.

"Don't you just like it here?" Henry asked Ramondo, as he watched the paddle steamer sailing across the lake towards its terminus nearby.

"It is relaxing," he replied. "I like the Yorkshire Dales, too."

"The scenery's beautiful, don't you think?" said Henry. "Much better than staring into outer space, coupled-up in a mobile asteroid. I could stay here for hours."

"I couldn't agree more," admitted Ramondo, as he picked his mobile out of a pocket, and noticed the time. "It's gone 1 o'clock, perhaps we ought to get a move-on?"

Henry looked at his watch.

"Ohhhhh," he moaned. "I don't want to go, but I suppose you're right. You don't mind taking a few pictures while we're here?"

Henry then went to stand beside the pub, while Ramondo caught him in the viewfinder of his mobile, before taking the photo. He also took another of Henry beside Ullswater, and gave the mobile to Henry to take a photo of himself.

"Let's get going," Henry then instructed, before asking for the car keys. "I'll take over the wheel from here."

When they got back to the car, they found it was hot inside, so had to stand outside for a few moments, while they left the doors open to give the car some fresh air.

As Henry drove along the lakeside, he seemed to be more interested in plodding along, looking at the mountains in the distance. Ramondo noticed this, and suggested to do the driving instead. Henry acknowledged this, and stopped in a car park near the head of Ullswater, where they changed seats again. Henry could now admire the scenery without compromising the driving.

The road was fine, though a little windy in places, until they got to the foot of the Kirkstone pass, where the gradient increased. As the road became steeper and steeper, Ramondo had to change gears, though the car went a fair way in fourth'.

"Take the next turning on the right," Henry instructed Ramondo. "It should come into view just beyond the crest of the pass."

Ramondo soon saw the road, and after he took the right-hand fork, thought he could relax a little. He left the gear in neutral and let the car roll down hill, but the road was steep, and he had to brake just to ensure the car didn't roll out of control. He pressed even harder when approaching sharp bends on the pass. When they got to the bottom, he asked Henry how much further he wanted to go.

"Are you fed up?" Henry asked him.

"Just a little," said Ramondo. "My legs are a bit worn out driving up and down those roads. You don't mind if we have a rest?"

"Okay," agreed Henry. "We're in the small town of Ambleside, now. You can pull over when we find a good place to park. At least we know the brakes are working!"

Ramondo pulled over into a parking space, once again in the full glare of the sun, before he and Henry exchanged seats.

"What do you think of the car overall?" Henry then asked him.

"Generally, I thought it was fine," said Ramondo. "It performed well. I think I got up to 95 miles per hour, but it could have done a fair bit more. Do you think I should have driven it a bit faster?"

"I think 95' was enough for the moment," Henry told him. "I don't fancy trying to go any faster at this time – we don't want the police checking us up on this car."

"The brakes worked well – I proved that five minutes ago!" said Ramondo.

"The sebo-meter is about where it started this morning."

"Excellent!" said Henry. "That means we've done over 100 miles without using any energy, effectively. You don't seem very impressed or excited, though?"

"I think it's an excellent car, and can't really fault it," said Ramondo. "I think it would be perfect for driving across the Sahara desert, if there was a motorway across it, but I doubt this is the sort of thing which will catch on in this country. We don't get enough sunshine."

"I didn't design this model for the UK," Henry then pointed out.

"Oh??" Ramondo said with some surprise. "Is this for Professor Wagstaff – I remember he kept saying how good the weather was in Tenerife."

"Not exactly," said Henry. "I don't think I should say too much more for the time being. Besides, perhaps we should get a move on."

"Where are we going now?" asked Ramondo. "Haven't we done enough testing for today, we've covered over 100 miles."

"You're not very enthusiastic about this car," Henry then commented.

"It's not that I'm not enthusiastic about it. I just don't want to get caught on the top of Hardknott pass with the mist coming down over us," Ramondo explained.

"I just wish you'd be a bit more positive about this car," Henry said to him.

"There's still plenty of energy left. In fact it's increasing slightly every minute we talk. If you've got any concerns, let me know now."

"If this car is not for the UK, I haven't any concerns about it," said Ramondo.

"Good!" said Henry. "If you do get any concerns, or recall anything odd about this morning's journey, let me know."

Henry then signalled to move off, looked in his mirror, out of his window and at his mirror again, before driving off. This time he drove another mountain pass, and then went down a long winding valley towards the

coast. The clouds had by now taken over the sky, though the sun still came out between them from time to time. Henry then turned back onto the main road leading to the motorway. As the road also led directly to Ingleton, he eventually bypassed the M6, and drove home.

The weather for the next day was similar to that of the previous two, except that there were a few more clouds lurking about in the sky. It was warm, eventually to turn humid, and by the time Henry and Ramondo set off for Skipton, the sebometer on the car was above the three quarter mark.

Just before they got to Skipton, Henry contacted Madaly at the company premises, where he requested the gates be opened for their arrival. He invited Lucas to come along with him this time, to test drive the solar car, and instructed Ramondo to stay with Madaly for the day.

Henry then drove out to test the car, and proceeded towards the A1(M), where he could test the speed of the car again. Eventually, when they approached Wearside, he turned off the motorway and into the rural valley, where the roads were fine at first. The further they proceeded, however, the smaller the roads became. The roads were rather bumpy, too, as they headed for the upper part of the valley.

When they stopped for lunch, Henry asked Lucas his views of the car's performance, which were basically the same as what Ramondo had said the previous day. Lucas also said that the suspension was in good order, after the number of bumps they had endured.

Lucas then took hold of the steering wheel on their journey back, which took them over a high moorland pass, before proceeding down the Tees valley, and then towards another dual carriageway. They ended the day with a drink at the highest pub in England, at Tan Hill.

When they arrived back at the Major Motors premises in Skipton, Henry called for Ramondo, and took him and Lucas to the meeting room. There, they discussed the solar car, it's benefits, and anything which may be improved. Henry then suggested that another, auxiliary battery would be very useful, as this could store more energy for the SEB, and could be used if ever the SEB ran out of energy. Lucas and Ramondo agreed with this, after which they discussed where this could be fitted and how large it should be.

The weather began to turn the next day, but Henry decided to test the solar car again. This time though, it was only for a few relatively-brief

journeys, to get an idea of how many miles the car could cover, what was the most economical speed, and precisely how much energy was required on gradients.

Meanwhile, back at Major Motors, Ramondo and Lucas were discussing where to fit the new additional SEB, or in this case, as they named it, a SAB (Solar Auxiliary Battery). They discussed where to fit the SAB to the solar car, and how large it should be.

"The most obvious place would be within the roof compartment," suggested Ramondo.

"But that would reduce the space behind the sunroof for the SEB, and for the heat to be absorbed," Lucas pointed out. "How about at the back of the car?"

"Behind the seats, or at the back of the boot?" Ramondo queried. "That would reduce the size of the boot, which isn't very big anyway."

"Yes, but do you really think someone using a two-seater sports car would need to carry four suitcases with them?" Lucas commented.

"Not really," said Ramondo. "Wouldn't it be odd to put the SAB at the back of the car, though - we'd have to implement long connections to the SEB."

"How about if we put the engine in the boot instead?" suggested Lucas.

"We may have to make the boot bigger, and amend the whole model," replied Ramondo. "Besides, whoever heard of putting an engine in the boot?"

"It's been done before," Lucas pointed out. "Back in the sixties, or maybe earlier, the Volkswagen Beetle had its engine in the boot. They were still being built thirty years later. There may even be some still around."

"Perhaps we could fit the SAB into the bonnet," Ramondo suggested.

"Possible, but we'd have to re-design the whole engine all over again," said Lucas. "Why don't we call the Major, see what he has to say?"

"I don't think he wants to be contacted today," Ramondo told him. "He's driving, testing the new car again."

"What!?" said a surprised Lucas. "The weather ain't up to much - he'll never get far today."

"He was only going locally, to drive the car 'til all the energy has been used up, to get an idea of how economical it is," explained Ramondo.

"You can't get a car more economical," said Lucas.

"Apparently, he wants to see how many miles it can do and at what speeds," said Ramondo. "Do you have the car's technical details on computer?"

"Yes," replied Lucas.

"Why don't we each have a look at what we can come up with, and we can look at them together for lunch," suggested Ramondo.

"Or tea," said Lucas.

The two of them each went to study the data on file, and assessed what they could move around in the car. Ramondo went to use the PC in Henry's office. While he was looking at the dimensions of the car, he thought about the using the roof of the car again. He 'placed' SAB in the front of the roof compartment, while the SEB was left behind the sunroof, looked at it all over and assessed how it may affect the car, before sending the image to Lucas.

Lucas was amending the plan of the car engine at the time, but agreed with Ramondo's plan. On consideration, however, he thought it better to position the SEB in front of the sunroof, reduce the width of the sunroof slightly on each side, to allow more hot energy to be absorbed by the SEB, and for the SAB to be moved to the back of the roof compartment. When he sent his amended plan to Ramondo, he agreed with this, so the two of them met for lunch to discuss this. They discussed all aspects of the car, and agreed that in all other respects, the original model was fine. When the new plan of the solar car was completed, they sent this to Henry. He looked carefully at the plan, and in full agreement, gave it his approval. He went to monitor the production of the new solar car, the next week. The three of them gave the new car a couple of short test-runs, which were similar to the ones earlier, and carried out a further inspection. By the end of the next week, a brand new sports solar car was ready.

New Business

Meanwhile, back in Tenerife, Arthur had by now forgotten about the solar panels he had intended to be put up in his house. He had eventually found a company in Spain, but when they gave a price, Arthur wasn't too keen. They explained that this included airfare and transporting materials. Arthur noted the price and said he'd ring them back later. Unfortunately, he had no luck in trying to find anyone else to carry out the work, and eventually forgot the case, until he received an email from Henry, showing the new solar car. He contacted Henry as he checked the message.

"Hello, is Major Retono available?" he asked as he rang Henry about his email.

"Hello, Professor Wagstaff, I'll put you through to the major," replied Zebrina who had answered the phone. "Hello Major," she then said to

Henry as she transferred the call, "I have Arthur on the line for you."

"Put him through, put him through," instructed Henry.

"Hello Major, I received your message," Arthur said to Henry when he was put through. "I was impressed with the new solar car when I looked at your web page. It would be excellent to market in California."

"That's what I intend to do," Henry told him. "I've had plans for a solar car for a while, but had to put them on hold as it wouldn't really be suited to the UK."

"Indeed, indeed," said Arthur.

"To be totally honest, I had some assistance with the design from Lucas and Ramondo," Henry admitted.

"Oh really," commented Arthur. "They're quite bright young chaps, aren't they?"

"Oh they're bright alright, though not so young any more," said Henry. "I have been thinking about sending one of them to LA as a consultant on my behalf."

"With all due respects, I don't think they're ready for that sort of thing just yet," said Arthur. "Oh, by the way, that offer you made me last month..."

"Remind me, which offer was that?" queried Henry.

"About installing solar-panels on my roof," said Arthur.

"Oh that one," said Henry. "The offer still stands if you're interested in it."

"Yes please, if it's no trouble," replied Arthur. "I've been scouring the local telephone directory and the web, but all I found was a company in Spain charging the Earth for the job."

"I suppose that's understandable, if someone's going to have to travel a thousand odd miles, plus carry cargo for the distance," commented Henry.

"I'll have a word with my men, it shouldn't cost too much."

"Sending them via Easy jet, eh," laughed Arthur. "I hope they let them take the tools and what-have-you."

"That shouldn't be a problem," said Henry. "Can you send me the dimensions of your house, so as Gaspar and Gonchaves can sort the frames out. They'll send you their projected plan."

"Oh good, good," said Arthur. "When will that be - after we've sorted the Californian project?"

"We may be able to arrange it before then, but I'll have to check if Gaspar and Gonchaves have any other arrangements in that time," Henry told him.

"Speaking of the Californian project, would you mind if I sent the plan of the solar car to your American contact, Frank?"

"No, not at all," replied Arthur. "You may want to send a picture of

yourself, as well."

"Why's that?" Henry asked curiously. "He doesn't think I'm some kind of Wookiee, or from the Planet of the Apes, does he?"

"Oh good gracious, no," said Arthur. "I just thought you may want to get to know the chap, particularly if we're going to meet him in the next few weeks."

"I suppose you're right," Henry sighed. "If you can give me Frank's email address, I'll forward the details of the new solar car to him."

"I don't recall the address off-hand, but I'll copy you in when I send him the details of your solar car," said Arthur. "He may want to contact you directly, himself. Can you let me know what he has to say?"

"I'll do that," said Henry.

A little later, Henry checked his PC mailbox, and found the new message from Arthur, quoting Frank's email address. It was a little later that day when Frank looked into his own PC mailbox. He didn't think a lot about the email at first, until he began reading it and noticed where it was from and what it was about. He then read the message with interest, and was impressed with idea of the solar car. He thought about contacting Henry immediately, but then wondered whether this was too good to be true. The longer Frank thought about this, the more he wondered.

In the end, he decided to send a reply, acknowledging the information. This was at night, in the UK, where Henry was sleeping at the time. After sleeping on the thought himself, Frank rang Arthur the following day.

"I'm afraid I don't know a lot more about this solar-powered car myself," Arthur said to him. "I was only told about it a couple of days ago."

"I'm not saying you can't utilise solar energy, but do you really believe it could power a vehicle?" queried Frank.

"Oh yes," said Arthur. "As I understand it, the heat going into the roof of the car, via the sunroof, is absorbed into a battery, which converts the heat into energy. It appears there are small solar panels, too, from which light is similarly absorbed."

"So you think the idea is plausible?" Frank queried again.

"Oh I think so," replied Arthur. "I know Henry has solar panels in his warehouse, from which the electricity is supplied in much the same way. From what I've seen, that doesn't seem to be a new idea in the UK. I don't think they get enough sunshine and heat to truly maximize the idea, though."

"Do you think it would be better suited to other places, like California?"

asked Frank.

“Oh most definitely,” Arthur told him. “In fact I’ve been considering having solar panels fitted to my house, here in Tenerife. I get the impression you’re not too keen on the idea?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I like the idea – I’m just not convinced, yet,” explained Frank. “I wouldn’t have believed the digital car you showed me at the ‘Convention last month if I hadn’t seen it for myself.”

“I take it that you would prefer to see the proof first, am I right?” Arthur queried.

“That’s about it,” said Frank. “I don’t want to tell the Governor of California about some genius idea, only to find it doesn’t work. I was presented with enough of them at NASA.”

“I understand where you’re coming from,” said Arthur. “I’ll ask Henry to get in touch, see if he can arrange to fly over this weekend.”

“I would be grateful,” said Frank.

“If we can’t arrange that, I’ll suggest we take both the solar and digital cars along next week,” Arthur suggested as an alternative. “The Governor’ will only be expecting to see the digital car, so perhaps we can surprise him with the solar car.”

“I’d rather see the solar car myself, first,” Frank told him

“I copied Henry in on the email, so you can contact him yourself, if you wish,” Arthur suggested. “Perhaps you can come up with your own arrangements.”

“I’ll see if I have the time,” replied Frank. “Thanks very much, anyway. Let me know how you get on.”

As it was, Henry had already arranged for both vehicles to be transported, and also managed to get a flight to Colorado Springs. He spoke to Frank the following day, to confirm this. Everything was ready.

Arthur managed to arrange 5 days leave for the following week. On Saturday, he flew to Leeds & Bradford airport, and spent the weekend with Henry and his team, where they arranged for Gaspar and Gonchaves to sort the solar paneling on Arthur’s roof.

Early on Monday morning, they drove the two cars to Heathrow, where they each booked-in, with their vehicles, before flying out to meet Frank. They slept lightly through most of the flight, to make up for their lack of sleep earlier. Due to the time difference, they arrived at Colorado Springs just before mid-day. On arrival, Arthur rang Frank to let him know, and while he and Henry went to pick up their vehicles, Frank drove to the

airport.

It was just after 1pm that Henry and Arthur parked their vehicles, and went to one of the café's in the airport to have some lunch. It was then that Frank rang them to check where they were, and five minutes later Arthur felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Do you mind if I join?" asked Frank, who had taken along a friend with him, though it wasn't who they had expected.

"Well, hello there," replied Arthur, before introducing him to Henry.

Then, to his amazement, someone appeared from behind Frank.

"Hello Arthur, how are you?" Dermot said to him. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your colleague?"

"Oh yes, yes, of course," Arthur said with surprise. "Meet Henry."

They all shook hands, and while Dermot and Henry were in dialogue, Arthur asked Frank where Clint was.

"Oh, he couldn't make it," Frank told him. "By the time this was arranged, he'd already booked to go away for a while."

"Oh??" mumbled Arthur. "Where exactly has he gone to? Hawaii, or Miami perhaps?"

"Nowhere as exciting, I'm afraid," said Frank. "Apparently, he's gone to see some friend of his in Texas. He didn't say where exactly."

"Perhaps he has a friend near Houston," Arthur suggested.

"Could be," said Frank. "Clint spent the best part of a year at NASA, so I dare say he has a buddy or two there. Maybe even a kitten!"

"A kitten?" asked Arthur. "Surely he wouldn't travel that far just to see a little cat grow up?"

Frank laughed.

"No, I mean a female friend," Frank explained. "That's what I often refer to as a kitten."

"Oh, sorry, sorry," Arthur giggled as he saw the funny side. "Please excuse me, but I didn't realise what you were referring to."

Just across the table, Dermot was telling Henry how impressed he was with the digital car he had bought from Henry.

"That car of mine is running well," Dermot then said to the others. "It's perfect for driving around Paris in. I've not had any problems it at all."

"Good, good," said Henry. "I can't recall if your car had our new logo on it, or title of the car?"

"I understand your business is named Major Motors," queried Dermot. "I don't believe there's a logo or name on the car though."

"We've decided to call it the Green Machine," Henry told him. "This new

vehicle will probably be called Green Machine 2, though we haven't yet decided that. To be honest, the UK isn't really suited to a solar car."

"Would you like me to come round to your factory to get this sorted?" asked Dermot. "I wouldn't mind coming to Yorkshire again some day. It reminds me where I came from."

"Don't worry, I'll send one of my engineers to sort this out for you," said Henry.

"That'll be marvellous," Dermot replied. "You're a genius!"

"Steady on, Dermot," said Henry. "I'm only an ordinary bloke."

"Nah, you must be a genius to design a car like that," Dermot told him.

"And now you've designed another one! I'm sure in years to come they'll remember your name like Isambard Kingdom Brunel or Thomas Telford."

"It shouldn't take a genius to design vehicles like those," said Henry.

"Much of the technology is out there already. It just needs someone who's prepared to put their mind to the job."

"Not everyone has the money behind them, unfortunately, to come up with these ideas," Frank chipped-in.

"Money shouldn't come into it," commented Henry. "There are plenty of businesses in the world today, who have the necessary finances and experience to design new technology. It's unfortunate that none of them are prepared to use those resources."

"Oh I couldn't agree with you more," said Dermot. "I'm thinking of developing something like that for Development to Mars, but they should already be available on Earth."

"There are car manufacturers only interested in developing petrol vehicles, because so many people there have interests in oil companies," said Henry. "There are oil companies claiming to develop greener fuels, but they're only interested in maintaining the status quo."

Frank, being American, and a Texan at that, didn't really agree with them. He recalled hearing similar quotes from Arthur, too, so just went along with their views initially. As they continued their criticism of today's businesses, led by the US, he decided to try to divert attention.

"Do you know when I, or should I say we, can have a look at the new solar car of yours?" he asked Henry.

Henry then looked at his watch, before looking at Arthur, to see if he had finished his lunch and drink.

"We'll be about another 5 minutes," he told Frank. "Would you like a drink in the meantime?"

"Thanks, but no thanks," said Frank. "When I start drinking, it's not easy to

stop, eh Dermot?"

Dermot gave his acknowledgement, and though he fancied a drink himself, thought it more prudent to see the solar car. He had few doubts about the car, but knew Frank was still a little sceptical about the whole project. He spoke to Frank while the others were finishing their lunch, and when they were all ready, they went to pick up the vehicles.

When Henry and Arthur had finished their lunch, they all proceeded to the airport car park. Frank led them out of the airport, and around the outskirts of the city, before heading up some steep hills. Eventually, he turned right into a small, unoccupied car park. He was getting out of his car as the others were pulling in.

"Apologies for leading you here, but this seemed to be the best place where you can show us your new cars," Frank said to Henry.

"Oh that's alright," said Henry. "We don't want to make this too obvious just yet."

"How did your car handle the gradients?" Frank asked.

"Oh, no trouble," said Henry. "No trouble, at all. I took the car along some similar roads back home. Why don't you come on in, and I'll show you how the car works."

Frank went into the solar car. Arthur and Dermot followed. Henry then pointed to the front of the roof, where it met the front windscreen, before opening the sunroof. He then led the others outside.

"If you look carefully, you will notice that the roof has a slightly hollow frame," Henry explained. "In front of the sunroof is the SEB, Solar Energy Battery."

Henry then referred to the back of the roof, where he pointed out some small solar panels behind the sunroof.

"Within the frame, the heat and sunlight collected is absorbed by the SEB," Henry explained. "The SEB has connections to the engine, which of course, supplies the power to the car."

"So this is a totally gasoline-free vehicle?" Frank then asked.

"Precisely," said Henry. "With this little beauty, there is no need for petrol, or gasoline, as you might say over here."

Frank then pointed to the nozzle towards the boot of the car.

"What comes out of there?" he asked.

"One of my engineers had intended to take away the nozzle," Henry then said, as Arthur stared at him with a curious grin. "In fact, he suggested to take away the whole fuel tank and exhaust, but I thought it better to maintain this in case of emergency."

"Can it run on gasoline?" was Frank's next question.

"I believe so," replied Henry. "It has all the necessary instruments to run on gasoline. It can be run as a dual-fuel vehicle, though that's not the intention."

"I noticed a couple of gauges on the dash board, but they didn't seem to be the usual fuel gauge," said Frank.

"The ones you may have seen are for the SEB and SAB," explained Henry.

"SAB?" queried Frank. "I saw that on the web page, but can you tell me a little more about it?"

"Yes certainly," said Henry. "I was about to come to that anyway. The SAB, or Solar Auxiliary Battery, is where the heat and sunlight are absorbed, when the SEB is full."

"So it acts like a second battery?" queried Dermot.

"You could say that," said Henry. "Whenever the SEB is using energy, and not making any new energy, alternate energy from the SAB is supplied to SEB."

"In what situations would the SEB not make new energy?" asked Frank.

"At times when the sun doesn't shine," said Henry. "It happens quite often in the UK. It may also be unable to make energy whenever it's dark, during the night for instance, or if it were driven in a tunnel."

"How fast can this car go?" Frank then asked.

"Between 120 and 130 miles per hour," said Henry. "I believe we put that on the web site."

"I was wondering if you could clarify the car's actual performance figures," specified Frank.

"The car performs just how you would expect a 2litre sports car to perform," Henry commented. "My colleagues and I tested the car on local roads back home, including motorways and dual carriageways. Unfortunately, we don't have access to a racing circuit where we could test the car to it's maximum."

"There's a highway not too far from her," Frank told him. "We could take it for a test ride there this afternoon."

The others all looked at him.

"I don't think that would be a good idea just at this time," said Henry. "You could test it when we go to LA later this week."

"Don't get me wrong, but I'd like to know the precise performance details, before we consult the Governor of California about this," said Frank.

"Don't worry, we'll get everything confirmed before then," Henry told him.

"If you like, you can come in this car for a while, see how it performs."

"I'll do that sometime, but I don't want to leave my car here for the moment," Frank replied.

"Well why don't you come in the car with me anyway," suggested Henry.

"I'm sure Arthur and Dermot don't mind staying here for a short while. They can keep an eye on your car too."

Frank wasn't too sure, but felt he should go along, so he could see for himself how the car performed.

"You don't mind keeping an eye on my car, do you?" he asked Arthur and Dermot.

"We'll be fine, we'll be fine," replied Dermot. "Of course, if you'd rather stay here, I wouldn't mind a trip in the sports car."

Frank decided to go along for the ride, and after strapping himself into his seat, relaxed. For about half-a-minute! Henry drove slowly out of the car park, and stopped on the main road to see if anything was coming. When he saw it was all clear, he turned right quickly, as the wheels screeched, and within less than 10 seconds, he had managed to get the car going at 60 miles per hour. Henry laughed.

"Not bad, eh," he said to Frank, who was a little surprised. "Where would you like me to go?"

"I don't mind," he replied. "You'd better slow down though, there's a couple of bends coming up shortly."

Henry slowed the car down, which he did relatively easily, and could hardly be felt on the suspension. After they had gone around a couple of bends, Frank suggested to pull over into a little side road, and to then turn back, as there was a dual carriageway in the other direction.

Arthur and Dermot saw the car heading back, a few minutes later, and thought it would pull into the car park, but as they saw it go by they waved, before getting into Arthur's digital car to sit down. Dermot said he was impressed with the solar car, and was interested in solar energy, at which point Arthur mentioned that he was going to have solar panels fitted to his house.

"That's a good idea," said Dermot. "You get plenty of sunshine where you are – you may as well make use of it."

"I think this may be the way forward," suggested Arthur.

"I think you may be right," agreed Dermot.

"Frank was telling me that Clint's gone to Texas for a break," Arthur then mentioned. "He weren't too sure where he went."

"He told me that too," said Dermot. "I reckon he's gone back to Houston,

to visit a mistress of his.”

“Do you really think so?” asked Arthur. “With all due respect, Clint isn’t a young lad anymore.”

“He may not be getting any younger, but he’s not a bad looking fellow,” Dermot commented. “He’s tall, slim, and with a fair bit of money, I’d say. Just what ladies want right now.”

As Dermot and Arthur continued to speculate about Clint, where he was and what he was up to, Clint, in the meantime, was getting off the local bus at one of the main private hospitals in Houston. He checked to make sure he was where expected to be, before he walked into the hospital.

“Hello madam, but can you confirm if Dr Steve di Pierri is in Jefferson ward,” he asked a lady on reception. “He’s a patient, I should stress.”

“There is a Steve di Pierri is in Jefferson ward,” she confirmed to Clint after checking her records.

“Can you point me in the right direction to the ward, please?” Clint asked the lady.

“Take the lift to the second floor,” the lady instructed. “Turn right, and you’ll find Jefferson ward is the third on your left. What’s your name – I can let Mr di Pierri know you’re coming?”

“Clinton,” he replied.

“And my name’s Monica,” the lady said, as she grinned at him.

“No, no, that’s my first name, Clint, as in Eastwood. My surname is Williamson,” he told her before walking off towards the lift.

Clint followed the directions given to him by the lady on reception. It seemed a long walk on the second floor, but sure enough, the third ward on the left-hand side had the name Jefferson above the door. As he peered through the door window, he thought he could see Steve watching TV from his bed, towards the back of the ward. Clint went in and walked over to him.

“Hello there Steve,” he said to him, as Steve turned around to see who was there.

“Clint, how are you,” he replied. “Good to see you again.”

“Good to see you too,” said Clint. “I must admit, you don’t look too bad, considering what happened.”

“So what brings you here?” asked Steve. “They haven’t sent you to NASA again?”

“No, no, not this time, thank God,” said Clint. “I thought I should come and pay you a visit, after what I heard.”

"So, what did you hear?" Steve queried.

"Only that you were caught up in a bomb explosion as you went to open your car," Clint told him.

"Where did you hear that?" Steve asked him.

"I only heard that second-hand," said Clint. "Maybe even third-hand. And that was from some European fellow at the convention."

"The Astronomer's Convention, you mean?" queried Steve.

"Yeah, that's the one," Clint told him. "I went there with Frank a couple of months ago."

"I heard that someone tried to assassinate the Governor of California?" asked Steve. "Did you get to see what happened?"

"Only that someone fell onto the stage, probably from one of the stanchions above," Clint told him. "A rifle came down with him. The Governor of California was there at the time, and so it's presumed that he was the intended target."

"You don't sound too convinced by that?" Steve asked, a little curiously.

"The media were just putting two and two together, and coming up with three, as usual," Clint commented. "There were a lot of people in the audience who could have been a target."

"Do you know something?" Steve asked, ever more curious.

"No, no," laughed Clint. "I just think the cops and media went for the easy option. Anyway, how are you feeling? I thought you may be in intensive care."

"It was a nasty incident, but on the face of it, I didn't come out of it too badly," Steve told him. "I can't remember a lot, other than pressing my car key fob a fair distance from the car."

"How far away was that?" asked Clint. "About twenty, twenty five metres?"

"I can't be sure, but it must have been something like that," said Steve. "I can't recall much else, other than waking up in hospital with cuts and burns all over me."

"I see you have a couple of scars here and there," said Clint.

"That was probably done by pieces of metal which must have been flung around when the explosion occurred," explained Steve.

"Do you know if your car was the target?" Clint asked.

"I can't be sure," replied Steve. "It must have been about 6 in the evening when the bomb went off. I don't believe there were many other cars in the car park at the time, and I can't recall any body else there at the time."

"Well at least you're okay and in one piece," Clint said to him.

“So, how are you keeping these days?” Steve then asked. “Are you still living in Colorado?”

“That’s about it,” said Clint. “Generally I don’t do a great deal, except let the misses spend the money. I still go to the gym once a week, and sometimes pop up to the observatory.”

“With Frank, I suppose?” asked Steve.

“Sometimes, but not always,” said Clint. “I like to see the cosmos out there for myself. I find it very fascinating - it’s like a new hobby of mine.”

“Good, good,” said Steve. “It’s good to have a past time – better than spending your days in hospital. How’s Frank, by the way?”

“Oh, he’s fine,” said Clint. “He’s currently on a project for a new sort of car that can run without gasoline.”

“When did he come up with that idea?” asked Steve.

“He didn’t,” Clint told him. “A fellow we met at the convention had one of these cars. Professor Arthur Wagstaff, I believe. I hadn’t heard of him until I met him at the convention.”

“I hadn’t heard of the bloke until recently, myself,” admitted Steve.

“Apparently, he discovered some minor planets outside our solar system.”

“He was with another fellow from the European Space Agency,” said Clint.

“Dermot, his name was, he was some friend of Frank’s.”

“Dermot O’Hagan, I should think,” Steve surmised. “I didn’t have many dealings with him. He holds some Directorship for the ESA nowadays.”

“So, tell me a little about this car that can run without gasoline,” Steve asked.

“I can’t say I know much about it, other than it ran on large digital chips,” said Clint. “Apparently, when one is in use, the others gain energy from their movements.”

“Interesting,” said Steve. “Does it have a conventional engine?”

“It had an engine similar to most of today’s cars,” Clint told him. “I don’t know whether it will ever catch on.”

“Only time will tell,” said Steve. “I suppose it depends a lot on how the car is marketed.”

“You’ll never guess who they’re trying to get to market this car?” Clint said to Steve, who looked on curiously. “The Governor of California.”

“I know the Governor has green credentials, but is he really going to put other things down just to market a new car?” Steve questioned. “That’s if he gets Frank’s messages. He must receive thousands of messages a day.”

“Well the Governor must have paid some attention to the project, as Frank

has a meeting next week with him," Clint told him. "Dermot and Professor Wagstaff are going along too."

"Do you reckon that car will work?" asked Steve.

"If you'd asked me if such a car could be constructed a year ago, three months ago, even, I'd have said no," said Clint. "During the convention, I saw the very car with my own eyes, I even travelled in it. I still don't find it any easier to believe."

"Well I'm sure there must be something in it, otherwise I doubt Frank would have gone along with the project," commented Steve.

"I'm sure if two Professors and a Director can go with such an idea, there must be something in it," said Clint. "Maybe it's just me, maybe I'm getting too old to recognise where change is possible in this world today."

"You shouldn't talk like that," Steve said to Clint. "There's nothing wrong with getting old – it happens to all of us. You shouldn't feel like you're in exalted company, either"

"Perhaps it's everything that's happened these past couple of years," sighed Clint. "The shuttle training, the asteroid, not to mention other things which have happened since."

"Like what?" Steve asked inquisitively. "Like the attempted assassination of the Governor of California?"

"One day I'll tell you," he said to Steve, with a smile as though he wanted to spill the beans.

"You can tell me now, if you like," Steve suggested. "I'm not going anywhere for another week, at least."

"One day, when the time's right, I'll tell you everything," replied Clint. "Are you due to be released next week?"

"Provisionally," said Steve. "Doctors will check me over again in a couple of days time. If all goes well, they'll probably check me over again at the weekend, to give me the all clear, and confirm a release date for me."

"That's good, that's good," said Clint. "You won't be going back to NASA for a while though?"

"Not for sometime, I shouldn't think," replied Steve. "I don't want to get too far ahead of myself just yet. When I get home, I'm just going to relax for a while. I'll go back when I feel I'm ready."

"That's what you need to do," agreed Clint.

"Whereabouts are you staying?" asked Steve.

"At a motel near the airport," Clint told him.

"Did you fly here?" Steve queried.

"I didn't fancy driving all the way here," said Clint. "I drove here last year a

couple of times, when I helped Frank move house, and didn't fancy doing that again. Particularly after I drove over 1000 miles to San Bernardino a couple of months ago."

"Will you be staying long?" asked Steve.

"Only until the end of the week," replied Clint.

"Well, if you fancy staying a little longer you can stay at my place if you like," suggested Steve.

"Thanks for the offer," Clint acknowledged. "I'll see what happens over the next few days. Wouldn't your wife and kids mind?"

"Naahhh," said Steve. "Carol would be glad of the company. Besides, I might be out next week."

Clint wasn't intending to stay beyond the weekend, but thought this may be a good opportunity tell Steve about the convention, what he heard, and what really happened there.

"I'll see how things go," said Clint.

Clint had bought some fruit, which he offered to Steve, and stayed at his bedside for an hour, often discussing the asteroid, and what could have happened to it. All the time, Clint wanted to discuss what he was told at the convention, and considered Steve's offer to stay a little longer.

Back in Colorado Springs, jet-lag had caught up with Arthur and Henry, who went back to the Mountainside Hotel. After demonstrating the new cars to Frank and Dermot, they went back to rest for a while, before going out for food in the evening.

"I 'focussed' on Frank," Henry told Arthur.

"Good, good," he replied. "That should be two of them who will have forgotten what I said at the convention."

"Two?" queried Henry. "Is there someone else you've told about how we arrived here, on Earth I mean?"

"Yes - Clint," said Arthur. "He went to the convention with Frank. He was with us when I disclosed the information."

"Do you know if he lives here?" queried Henry. "Perhaps we can pay him a visit."

"Oh I believe he lives somewhere in this city," Arthur told him.

"Unfortunately, he's gone away for the time being, according to Frank."

"Do you know where he's gone, or when he'll be back?" asked Henry.

"Apparently, Frank said he went to Texas, though he didn't seem to be sure whereabouts," said Arthur. "I wouldn't worry too much about Clint. He's not the sort of chap who'd go blurting things out."

"Let's hope you're right," said Henry. "We'll keep in touch with Frank, in case we hear anything more about this other chap."

After Arthur and Henry had their meals and a glass of wine or two, they went to their rooms, where they watched TV for a while. They each slept well that night. Henry didn't awake until 8.15 the following morning. When he realised what the time was, he quickly washed, dressed and brushed his teeth, before dashing downstairs for breakfast, where he expected to see Arthur. Arthur wasn't there though, so he went back upstairs and knocked on Arthur's door. It wasn't until he was about to go back downstairs that Arthur came to the door. He was getting up at the time, and asked Henry to order breakfast for him, saying he'd be downstairs soon.

It wasn't until well after 9am that they'd finished breakfast and went back up to their rooms. They didn't have long to rest there, though, as Dermot rang to say that he and Frank were on their way into town. They met them at reception just after 10', where it was noticeable that Frank had warmed to the new cars. Henry agreed to let him drive the solar sports car. Frank was excited, as he's original anxiety and caution had now been overcome. Frank enjoyed driving the car, and could see it's potential. He took the others to a restaurant in town for lunch that afternoon, where he saw his wife, Jeanette. He waved to her, as she came over, along with Clint's wife.

"Hi honey, what are you doing in town?" asked Frank.

"Oh, just ensuring we have our full resources," she replied cheekily, before she went to kiss him.

"Spending my cash, more like it!" commented Frank, before he introduced her and Mary to his friends, and vice versa. "Mary's the wife of a good friend of mine, Clint, whom some of you may already know."

As they talked briefly, Arthur asked Mary where Clint was.

"Oh, he's gone to Houston to see some buddies at NASA, I think," she told him. "I know one of them was recuperating in hospital."

"Do you know the chap's name, off hand?" asked Arthur.

"Steve something or other," said Mary

"Steve di Pierri?" queried Frank, who overheard the conversation.

"Yes, that's the fellow," she replied.

"Well if you hear from Clint, tell him to say hello to Steve for me, thanks," said Frank.

"Sorry to disturb you, fellas', but Mary and I have some more resources to

get," Jeanette then said to them, before her and Mary waved goodbye to the men.

Arthur noted that Clint had gone to visit Steve, while Frank and Dermot didn't think any more about it. Henry didn't know Steve, so thought nothing more of it, either. After lunch, Henry took Dermot in the solar sports car. Dermot even had a hand at the wheel for a while, and he too was impressed with it. They agreed that the project was now ready to go, and that they would leave for Sacramento, state capital of California, the following day.

Arthur and Henry drove to Frank's on Wednesday morning. They stayed for a coffee, and a brief chat, before Henry gave Frank the keys of the solar car, and let him lead them to the main highway outside Colorado Springs. Henry and Frank shared the driving in the solar sports car, as did Arthur and Dermot in the digital car. They didn't rush the journey, which was partly across country, but still made good progress, spending the night at a highway motel.

They made good progress again the following day, and when they crossed into California in the afternoon, Frank contacted the State Governor's office to confirm they would be there to meet the Governor the next morning. Again, they spent the night at a highway motel, this time just outside Sacramento.

The following morning, they drove to State Hall in the centre of the city, where they met a couple of the state Governor's agents.

"Good Morning, I'm Joe Goldstein, Transport Engineer for the state of California," he said to the four of them. "You must be the guys that have come here to meet the State Governor?"

"Yes, thank you," Frank said to him, before introducing Arthur, Henry and Dermot. Mr Goldstein then introduced a local businessman, Mr Gary Armstrong, who was standing beside him.

"Will the Governor of California be coming here later?" asked Arthur.

"I'm afraid he had some urgent business to attend, and asked us to represent him instead," said Mr Goldstein. "I understand that you have a proposition?"

"We have two vehicles which we believe will revolutionise the transport of today," Frank told them.

"We have two automobiles which are not dependant on gasoline, but use other, greener, non-polluting fuels," Henry added.

"As we understand it, the Governor of California is very keen on green

issues, am I correct?" Frank then queried.

"Yes, indeed, the current Governor of the state of California is keen on environmental issues, and wishes to avoid further-polluting the planet," Mr Goldstein confirmed. "However, can you clarify how these automobiles can benefit the state of California?"

"If we can produce vehicles like the ones we have with us today, carbon emissions from the roads in California will be substantially reduced," emphasised Frank.

"I fully accept that, but what I'm curious about is why you referred the matter to the Governor of California?" asked Mr Goldstein.

"Basically, we cannot fully develop the project to it's full potential ourselves," Frank told him. "We felt that the Governor of California would fully endorse this project, and indeed, he has done so since this was first brought to his attention."

"I believe what Professor Marshall is trying to say is that this project requires financial backing," Mr Armstrong chipped-in.

"I'm afraid the state of California has many responsibilities to it's citizens," Mr Goldstein then told them. "Motor manufacturing isn't one of them. I'm sure Mr Armstrong would be in a better position to help you, however."

"The Governor of California has spoken to me about this project of yours, and shown me the links on the websites for the proposals," Mr Armstrong then stated. "I'm a businessman first and foremost, but I also strongly believe in the environment and can see that your project has a lot of potential."

"Are you saying you're prepared to back us with this?" Frank then asked.

"As I said, it appears that your project has a lot of potential, but at this moment in time, it remains just potential," Mr Armstrong stipulated. "I may be prepared to back this, but I wish to see the potential for myself before I'm prepared to give any financial endorsement."

"Well that should be fine," said Frank. "We have the vehicles here with us. You can see them for yourself, if you like."

Mr Goldstein then whispered something into Mr Armstrong's ear, after which they asked to be excused for a few minutes. This gave Frank, Henry, Arthur and Dermot a chance to revise their presentation, as they had originally expected to meet the state Governor himself. As spokesman for the group, Frank would present the solar car, while Arthur would lead with his digital car.

A few minutes later, Mr Goldstein and Mr Armstrong came back into the room, and asked to see the cars, at which point they were taken to the

vehicles. While Frank and Arthur explained how the cars worked, Henry and Dermot helped to emphasise how environmentally friendly they both were. Mr Goldstein and Mr Armstrong asked a lot of questions, but slowly they warmed to the idea of the new cars.

"These cars can drive like ordinary cars we see on the road today, plus the energy they use doesn't cost anything," Henry told them

"Looks good to me," said Mr Armstrong. "Do you think we could take the motors for a ride?"

"Of course, be my guest," said Frank. "You won't mind if one of us comes with you, Mr Armstrong?"

"No of course not," he replied. "You can call me Gary, by the way."

Frank then went over to Henry and suggested he sit in for the ride, before handing him the keys to the solar car. Henry then went to open the car door, before sitting in the passenger's seat and giving the keys to Mr Gary Armstrong.

Gary seemed quite pleased with the car as he drove it out of town and onto the highway, where he could get a better feel of the car's performance.

"This is a 2 litre car, I believe?" Gary queried.

"Yes," Henry acknowledged. "My engineers and I thought about this and felt a 2 litre engine would be about right for this model. We can develop larger engine sizes for this, if you feel that would be more appropriate."

"Oh no, that's okay for now," said Gary. "Did you say this car was your idea?"

"This particular solar car was my idea," said Henry. "The other, digital car, was actually adapted by my engineers in the UK one day."

"You say it only took one day to come up with something like this?" queried Gary.

"The ideas didn't take long," Henry told him. "Unfortunately, the development and selling of them took a little longer."

"You said this car can do about 120 miles per hour?" Gary asked.

"A little more actually," Henry bluffed, as he hadn't tried the car at that speed before. "I don't know what the speed limits are here, but you might want to try it out when we're out of town."

"Oh I'll give it a go, alright. I doubt the authorities will chase me for a measly speeding fine," said Gary, as he pressed hard on the accelerator. The car increased speed quickly. One minute they were travelling at 60 miles per hour, and a few moments later they were doing 80', 90', then 100 miles per hour.

Henry didn't feel quite so confident on the journey now. He didn't show it, but just kept talking to Gary, as the speed increased again. While Gary was driving, he often looked at the sabometer, to see how much energy was going from the SAB to the SEB. It was still a hot day, though the sun went in and out of the clouds at times, so the energy levels didn't reduce a great deal, and the sebometer remained 'full'.

Gary had driven the car about thirty miles out of Sacramento by the time he decided to turn off at the next junction on the highway and head back to town. Back at State Hall, Joe Goldstein was becoming a little impatient. He called on Gary's mobile to see where he and Henry were, but the mobile was switched off. Arthur then received a call from Henry to let them know all was fine.

"Where are you at the moment? We've been worried about you," Arthur told him.

"Don't worry, everything's in hand," Henry answered. "We've been testing the speed of the car on the main highway around here."

"How fast did you get up to?" asked Arthur.

"125 miles per hour," Henry told him. "We're heading back into town now, though looking around us, I think Gary's taking the scenic route, so I don't know how long we'll be."

At that point, Joe asked if he could take a ride in the digital car, to which Arthur agreed. Arthur told Henry this, to which he agreed too. Before they left, Joe took Frank and Dermot back to his office, and left them with some of his staff, before he went to test the digital car with Arthur.

Arthur drove at first before letting Joe take the wheel. He didn't drive as fast as Gary had done, not that the digital car, which had a 1.6 engine, was designed for speed. Joe checked the fuel gauge, when they arrived back at State Hall at 12.30. It hadn't moved at all. By this time, Henry and Gary were waiting for them in the Hall reception, before they all went off for lunch.

"Great motor, that solar-powered vehicle of yours," Gary said to Henry. "It's marvelous for California on days like this, but don't you ever worry that today's weather is becoming too erratic?"

"I am cautious of that," said Henry. "I had the idea for this in the UK, but the weather doesn't suit a solar car. I accept the weather can be erratic, even in California, but, speaking with Frank, we calculated that with the auxiliary battery, the car should last a good while, even with erratic weather patterns."

"The problem is that the US is a very large country," Gary commented. "If

someone wanted to drive from Miami to LA it would probably take the best part of three days. If he, or she, got caught in the Mojave dessert at night how are they going to get the car to move if the SEB is empty?"

"I didn't think it ever rained in the Mojave dessert?" Henry replied.

"Besides, the SEB and SAB will never run out of energy in any dessert, because desserts are always extremely hot during the day."

"I take your point, but what about during the hurricane season?" queried Joe. "The weather can be a total wash-out for weeks on end."

"I accept that, but before any hurricane season, there must be a lot of extremely hot weather to cause this," Henry replied. "So again, neither the SEB nor SAB should run out of energy before a hurricane."

"Besides, weather forecasting is much more accurate these days," said Frank.

"That could also see the introduction of another innovative idea," Dermot then suggested.

"Oh? What innovative idea would that be?" asked Joe.

"You could have solar stations, instead of petrol, pardon me, gasoline stations," Dermot told him. "If we can absorb solar energy, including heat, into a car like this one, think what else we could do. It'll be a lot easier than digging for oil beneath the ground."

Henry, Frank and Arthur didn't know what to say, but Gary grinned and patted Dermot on the back.

"That's my man!" Gary said to Dermot. "I can see I'm going to get along with you just fine. I can see I'm going to get along with all of you just fine."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you said on your website that the digital car you have is currently being manufactured in the UK?" Gary then queried with Henry.

"We are producing a few of them, but we don't have a large enough factory or resources to manufacture the model in bulk," Henry informed him.

"Have you brought that particular project to the attention of Mr Virgin?" asked Gary.

"Do you mean Sir Richard Branson?"

"Yeah, that's the fella'," said Gary.

"No, not yet," said Henry. "We have considered raising this with him, and a couple of other entrepreneurs in the UK, but we thought we'd bring this your attention first."

"We feel that the US is probably the best place to develop such projects," added Frank. "If we can get the American public to take the lead in

environmentally-friendly vehicles such as the ones we have here, the rest of the world will follow its lead."

"That's a very valid point," admitted Gary.

"We felt that the Governor of California would be the ideal person to promote this project," Frank added.

"I see, I see. It's all beginning to make sense now," said Gary. "Tell me, where did you meet the 'Governor?'"

"At this year's International Astronomers Convention in San Bernardino a few months ago," said Frank.

"It's a good job he wasn't assassinated, eh," said Gary.

"You don't mind me asking, but do you think this project can go ahead?" Frank then asked him.

"I think there's a distinct chance this project may well go ahead," Gary replied. "Before I give my full endorsement, I'd like to try the digital car this afternoon, if that's okay?"

"That's fine," said Frank. "We just don't want to be wasting our time and money here."

"Would you mind if I had a drive of that digital motor you have with you?" Gary then asked Arthur.

"No not at all," said Arthur. "I'm afraid it doesn't go at 125 miles per hour, though I believe there is a sporty version of this car in the UK."

"That's okay," said Gary. "Not everyone in the US is going to want to drive a sports car. Not everyone can afford one, for that matter."

Gary then took Frank and the others for a meal, before he went to try the digital car. He was pleased with that car too, but stipulated that other factors had to be sorted.

"Henry, you have premises in the UK," he queried. "Do you know how much they cost, including all machinery, resources and domestic requirements?"

"Not off-hand, but I have the details in my laptop," he replied, even though this wasn't true. "I'll go and have a look at them in a little while, and confirm the expenses to you."

"That would be great," Gary said to Henry, as he handed the keys to the solar sports car back to him. Henry then asked Arthur if he'd mind coming along with him, at which point Arthur handed the keys of his digital car to Dermot before he went off with Henry.

"Frank, I believe you were Astronomer-in-Chief at NASA," Gary then queried, to which Frank nodded. "You know a little about staffing, budgets and resources?"

"It's a little over a year since I had those responsibilities, but I had a little look at Henry's figures," Frank replied, even though Henry hadn't put any figures together.

"So what did you think of them?" Gary asked him.

"Well, they looked okay to me, but..." muttered Frank, trying to think of a way he could get out of this situation.

"But what?" asked Gary.

"I considered investing in the project," said Frank.

"And did you?" asked Gary.

"I realised that I didn't have sufficient cash to support such a project on my own resources," Frank explained. "Mind you, I did realise that if the right person came along, this project could be the next big thing."

"That's why you stayed with the project, I presume?" Gary queried.

"That is correct," said Frank.

"Well, I'd like to ask you to look at Henry's figures again, from an American perspective, you know what I mean," said Gary.

"I sure do," said Frank, grinning.

"Good, good, that bit's settled," said Gary, before referring to Dermot.

"Shall we go to see how the digital car performs?"

"Oh certainly," said Dermot, as he led Gary towards the digital car.

Just then, Frank rang Henry on his mobile.

"Do you mind if I come and see you for a few minutes?" he asked.

"Erhh, Arthur and me are still in the car," Henry replied, a little unsure precisely what to tell him. "Why don't you wait for us in the hall reception. We shouldn't be too long."

"I think it's about time we told Frank just who we really are, and how we're producing our vehicles," Arthur then commented.

"Are you kidding?!" Henry said to him. "I've now 'focused' on him, and wiped out any recollection of what you told him at that convention. I don't want anyone to know how we go about things, let alone who we really are."

"We can't hide the facts forever," said Arthur. "Someone's going to find out sooner or later."

"Not if I can help it," replied Henry. "Now, can we get on with sorting this expenditure for my premises?"

"You don't have many resources, not for manufacturing," Arthur commented to him.

"That's cos' we're a developing business," said Henry. "We can't all start with factories like Ford or General Motors."

“Perhaps you should admit your cars are made from scrap,” suggested Arthur.

“No way!!” exclaimed Henry. “My cars are as good as brand new – no, even better. I’m not having my cars being compared with write-offs.”

“Perhaps you can say you bought them as second-hand cars and developed them into new models,” Arthur then suggested.

“I’ll think about that one,” said Henry. “Now, let’s assess our expenditure. Staffing – what is the annual wage bill going to be? ”

“Well, if I remember correctly, £7.50 was about the average hourly rate,” Arthur said to him. “That would amount to about a 14.5–15 thousand pound salary.”

“That doesn’t sound enough,” said Henry. “Let’s say a car mechanic salary would be £25K. Multiply that by six workers, and we have a wage bill of £150,000.”

“How about your salary?” queried Arthur. “What would you pay the Managing Director?”

Henry thought to himself for a few moments.

“£50,000,” he thought aloud. “That would bring the wage bill to two-hundred-thousand pounds.”

“What about those ‘Engineers’ you mentioned the other day?” asked Arthur.

“Hhmmm,” Henry thought to himself. “Better give them salaries of £30K. I suppose I’d better have my own PA, and an Admin Assistant. Add another £35K. How much is the annual wage bill now?”

“Two-hundred-and ninety-five-thousand pounds,” said Arthur. “If you have a cleaner on part-time pay, you can add another £5000, to bring that to £300K.”

“Good thinking,” said Henry. “I suppose I have a couple of security guards I should add to that. Add another £30K to the wage bill.”

“What in total, or times by two?” asked Arthur.

“Just in total, two fifteen thousand pound salaries,” Henry told him. “That will bring the wage bill up to £330K. Shall I double that amount for overheads?”

“What overheads?” asked Arthur. “Sickness, leave and absence won’t come to that much, surely.”

“There are plenty of other overheads,” Henry told him. “Employers National Insurance contributions, employers pension contributions, maternity, paternity...”

“Good God,” shrieked Arthur. “Madaly’s not pregnant already?”

"No, no, no," said Henry. "They're just other factors which must be taken into account for overheads. Then there are meetings, management expenses, shall I go on?"

"No, no, you've made your point," said Arthur. "I'll tell you what, as your business is new and doesn't have many of these factors just yet, we can bring the total wage bill up to a round £600K."

Henry agreed with that.

"How about rent or rates?" Arthur queried.

"I believe we pay two-and-a-half grand per month in rent," said Henry.

"That equates to thirty thousand pounds per annum," said Arthur. "What about insurance? Your company is insured, I hope?"

Henry thought to himself for a minute.

"We don't really need to insure anyone," he told Arthur. "We don't have any awkward or dangerous machinery. I suppose we should insure the premises."

"You must have some sort of insurance for your staff," said Arthur. "It won't look very good to Gary, or Frank even."

"Okay, add another twenty grand per annum to the total," Henry agreed.

"Can you think of anything else we need to add to this?"

"Not that I can think of at this moment," Arthur replied.

"Well, we'll just have to leave it like this for now," Henry told him. "If anyone asks about any other items, we'll just have to tell them we've included it in overheads."

The two of them then went to the State Hall reception, taking the laptop with them, where Frank was waiting.

"I was wondering where you two had got to," he said to them jokingly.

"You hadn't been to outer space, at all?"

Arthur and Henry looked at each other but said nothing.

"Would you mind if I have a look at your company's expenditure?" Frank asked Henry.

"No, be my guest," Henry said to him before handing him the laptop, which had the expenditure on screen.

Frank tutted as he checked Henry's figures. Henry was becoming a little apprehensive, though didn't show it.

"These details were produced a little while ago, when I first started the business," he told Frank, trying to bluff his way out of any loopholes. "I haven't included some items, which may be required if this project gets off the ground."

"Is that why you haven't included any stock or resources?" Frank asked.

"The only asset you've listed is a van."

"Well, to be honest, we don't have many resources," Henry confessed.

"We're currently purchasing second-hand motors - relatively new, just a couple of years old, mind you. I'm sure you know, by this time they will have depreciated in value by 50% but are still in top condition."

"Is that allowed?" Frank queried. "To purchase second-hand motors and convert them into new models?"

"We have a licence for producing vehicles, and we have our own brand now, Major Motors," Henry told him. "This isn't what I intended to do, but it'll have to do for now."

"I think we should add some stock, give this company a little more value," Frank suggested. "I reckon we ought to add another hundred-thousand pounds as plant & machinery, don't you think?"

"That's fine by me," said Henry.

"I think we should add another fifty thousand pounds in insurance, as well," suggested Frank, to which Henry agreed. "You don't have many staff," he then asked.

"I'm looking to build my workforce in due course," said Henry. "My Engineers are part of the current workforce."

"I think we should add a couple more, don't you think?" Frank suggested.

"Increase the company value."

"Why don't you add a few young apprentices?" suggested Arthur.

"Yes, I think that would be a good idea," added Frank. "You are aware that if Gary and 'the Governor' back your project, it will be based here in California, by the way?"

"The thing is, if this all works out, I should come into some much-needed money, from which I can further-develop my own company's resources," Henry said to him. "We can then produce our own vehicles."

"Didn't you say you were considering bringing this to the attention of that Virgin guy?" queried Frank. "He should be able to support a project like this one."

"To be honest, the thing that puts me off that idea is that things take too long in the UK," said Henry.

"You know, you're not the first person to tell me that," Frank said to him.

"On the whole, the figures seem okay, for a new business. Gary wants me to look over them, to get an idea of what he may face if he took on this project."

"Do you think he will take up this project?" Henry asked as his eyes began to light up.

"I can't say with any degree of certainty, but I think he may do," said Frank. "What I will say is that if I knew how low this expenditure was, I may have invested in the project."

"Where do you think the Governor of California fits into all this?" asked Arthur.

"Oh I think he's behind this all somewhere, lying low for the moment while others assess the situation," Frank told him. "However, after witnessing certain events over these past eighteen months I doubt I could ever be absolutely certain of anything anymore."

"Are you referring to that asteroid?" Arthur queried with intrigue, to see what Frank remembered, and whether there may be any hint of what he'd told him at the convention a few months earlier.

Henry, on the other hand, wasn't quite so intrigued, as Frank recalled the strange movements of the asteroid, that, now unbeknown to him, was the Interstellar Pilgrim.

"No, I don't think I could take anything for granted anymore," Frank muttered after he'd finished talking about the asteroid. "Not even that the Governor of California was the target of the attempted assassination at the convention."

"Do you fancy a coffee?" Henry then asked him, trying to change the subject. "There's a drinks machine over in the corner."

"I'll tell you what," Frank then said. "There's a café just across the road – why don't I treat you two to a coffee, or tea if you prefer. We may even see Dermot and Gary coming back from their current stint."

Henry and Arthur accepted Frank's offer and went over to the café with him. There, they talked for a while and watched out for the digital car which Dermot and Gary were travelling in.

When they eventually returned, Henry went over to where they had parked the car, and invited them over to the cafe. Gary asked to be excused as he had other business commitments, but Dermot went with Henry to meet Frank and Arthur.

Dermot told the others that everything had gone well on his journey. The car had got up to 90 miles per hour, with capacity to go faster, and had performed well. He thought Gary had been impressed, as he dangled the keys in front of him. The four of them then began making their next plan.

"In the event of this project going ahead, I'd be prepared to put money into it," Frank told the others. "Precisely how much, none of us know at this moment."

"Do we have any idea of how much this will be?" asked Dermot.

“Henry has taken the trouble to print some copies of his current company’s expenditure,” Frank told the others as he handed a copy to each of them. “I’ve had a good look at this, and believe that this project will require at least twice as much money. Agreed?”

Arthur, Henry and Dermot all agreed.

“Now, if this were to go ahead, would any of you be prepared to put any money in?” Frank then asked the others.

The others all looked at each other.

“Do any of you have any money to put into this project?” he asked them.

“Well, if it were to go ahead, and I’m talking hypothetically you understand, I would like to contribute something towards it,” said Dermot.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have a great deal of my own money to put in.”

“I would like to contribute something towards such a project,” said Henry.

“Before I commit myself, however, I’d like to first see how much I can borrow at this moment, what with the credit crunch.”

“How about you, Arthur?” asked Frank.

“Well, again, I don’t have a lot of money at the moment, though perhaps Dermot and I could take a stake in this between us,” he suggested.

“That’d be fine by me,” said Dermot.

“So looking at this, if we put 50% of the money into this project between all of us, what would you say if we contribute these sort of percentages?”

Frank then asked. “It looks as if I will have to put 30% towards this myself. Henry, how would 10% sound for you?”

“That’s fine by me, providing I can get the money,” he replied.

“That would leave 10%. Would you two be prepared to contribute 5% each?” he asked Dermot and Arthur.

“I think I could muster that amount,” Arthur told him.

“That’d be fine by me,” said Dermot as he nodded in agreement towards his share. “How about your friend who came to the convention, Clint? Do you think he’d want to put something towards this?”

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Maybe?” he added with a question mark.

The four of them then made a plan of action while they waited for Gary to come back. Frank copied Henry’s expenditure, and decided to double the workforce. The others were in agreement with this, as they were in increasing certain salaries, adding stock and resources. These measures, together with the increased overheads that came with them, increased the total expenditure to 30 million dollars. They then worked out how much this equated to in pounds and euros, so Henry, Arthur and Dermot could assess how much they were going to put into the project. Then,

eventually, Frank received a call on his mobile from Gary.

"I'm afraid I can't confirm any agreements have been made yet, but was wondering if I could borrow one of the motors this weekend?" Gary asked.

Frank mentioned this to the others.

"We don't mind if you take the solar sports car," he told Gary after he'd spoken to Henry, Arthur and Dermot. "We really could do with the digital car, as there are more than two of us here."

"That's fine," replied Gary. "I had hoped you'd release the solar car. I need to demonstrate it to a few more people."

"Anyone we know?" asked Frank.

"Like the Governor of California, perhaps?" added Arthur, to which Frank, Dermot and Henry all told him to be quiet.

"I can't say just yet, except that it's someone very important," said Gary.

"You can come and collect the keys anytime," Frank told him. "We're in the café across the road from State Hall."

"That's fine," said Gary. "I'll see you soon."

Frank, Henry, Arthur and Dermot all speculated that Gary was going to show the solar sports car to the Governor of California. They also speculated whether he was involved behind the scenes, as Frank had earlier thought.

Gary came to collect the keys about ten minutes later. Frank handed Gary a copy of the new expenditure he and the others had agreed upon, after which Gary said a final consultation was arranged with them on Monday. He offered to take them out for an evening meal, but they all politely declined. Frank took Gary's mobile number, before they all went back to their motel.

Frank, Henry, Arthur and Dermot each spent much of the weekend speculating on whether the final consultation was just to rubber-stamp the project, who would sign up to it, and whether the Governor of California was involved in this somewhere. Frank already had enough money to put down on the project, but the others each had to look at their finances to see whether they could afford their perceived percentages or how much they would have to borrow from the banks. Then there was the question whether the banks would lend any money to them for such a project.

Henry thought about selling his own business, but it would probably mean that some of his staff would have to be laid off (not that there was a great deal of work there anyway). Perhaps he could take some of them with

him, as they were involved in the project. On the other hand, perhaps Lucas and Ramondo could set up their own business. Then there were their partners, Madaly and Zebrina, and Gaspar, Gonchaves, Frickas and Robinson, too.

Arthur and Dermot thought they may be in a better position to borrow money from European banks, as the credit crunch hadn't hit the continent as much as the UK and the US. The Euro was doing well financially against the dollar and the pound, too.

The four of them went out and about as much as they could over the weekend, to take their minds off the project for a while. However, Monday morning couldn't come soon enough.

The four of them went to State Hall on Monday, where they met Gary in reception, who led them to a meeting room. Waiting there was Joe, a finance manager, and the PA to the state Governor. After formal introductions, Gary opened the meeting by explaining the project, before he referred the case to Henry, who was by and large, the creator of the project, if not the instigator. Henry wasn't sure whether a presentation was required, as most of those present knew about the project. However, as this was an official meeting which was to be minuted, he decided to put a presentation together.

The PA seemed interested in the presentation. Henry explained the benefits of his vehicles, and the potential for development, plus the possible financial benefits, which could materialise. Gary provided his full backing, and after a brief summary, he handed a copy of Frank's projections, which had now been increased to \$10million, and contained details of the proposed contributions from each party towards the project. Gary explained the expenditure to all those present, and answered a few questions, before making one final request.

"Would you mind if we kept the cars you have demonstrated these past few days?" he asked.

Frank, Arthur, Henry and Dermot looked at each other, as they weren't too sure about this.

"We don't mind releasing the solar sports car," Henry then replied. "We need access to a vehicle in order to get back to Colorado Springs, so we would prefer to keep the digital car."

"I would like both cars so as I can arrange for them to be advertised," Gary told the others.

Frank, Arthur, Henry and Dermot asked for a short time alone so as they could discuss the request, and so went out of the room briefly. Arthur,

Henry and Dermot could agree to the suggestion if they were given a plane ticket back to Colorado Springs, from where they would catch their return flights to Europe. Frank wasn't too keen on this at first as he wasn't due to go to the airport, but the others persuaded him to request a similar ticket.

Now in agreement, the four of them went back to the meeting room and said they would accept Gary's suggestion in return for flight tickets back to Colorado Springs. Frank stated this to Gary but pointed out that they were due to stay another night on the outskirts of Sacramento, and that they required the digital car until they left. Gary noted this, and said that he would come to their motel the following morning and travel to the airport with them, before picking up the digital car. Arthur, Henry and Dermot said they were okay with this, as was Frank.

Gary then invited all parties to sign a form as a binding agreement to the project and its contributions. They noticed that one person had already signed the document, though none of them recognised the signature. The meeting was concluded with a shaking of hands from all parties. Frank, Arthur, Henry and Dermot all left the meeting very pleased. As they were leaving the room, Gary called Frank over into a corner.

"Hey Frank, Frank, come over here a minute," he called. "There's a few things I need to sort out with you."

"How can I help?" said Frank.

"Is there any particular deadline by which you need to leave for Colorado Springs tomorrow?" Gary asked.

"I don't think there's an absolute deadline tomorrow," Frank told him.

"Henry, Arthur and Dermot aren't due to fly home until Wednesday."

"So you can stay another night here?" Gary suggested.

"We could I suppose," said Frank. "We had planned to leave tomorrow morning, as we were going to drive back."

"Would you fancy staying another night here?" Gary queried.

"I don't know," said Frank. "I haven't really thought about it. I don't know if the others would like to do so, though come to think of it, they've got a flight to catch from the Springs' so I doubt it."

"Say, do you think they'll be able to stump up the money for their contributions towards this scheme?" Gary queried.

"I don't really know," said Frank. "Shouldn't you be asking them that?"

"I should really, but I thought you might know," said Gary.

"I should think they'll be able to match their proposed contributions," Frank then told him. "It isn't as though the contributions are absolutely massive."

"Oh I realise they're pretty meager to you and me, but I'm a bit afraid they won't be able to borrow enough from the banks, what with the credit crunch at the moment," commented Gary.

"Henry could always sell his current business," said Frank. "I think Arthur and Dermot should be able to borrow enough cash from a European bank, which hasn't been hit by the credit crunch as much as in banks in the US or UK."

"There's one other thing I'd like to ask while you're here, " Gary said to him.

"Oh, what's that?" asked Frank.

"Have you thought about being part of the new company?" asked Gary.

"Would you like to be part of the new company? MD maybe?"

"What me? Managing Director?" said Frank with utter surprise.

"Wouldn't you like to be MD?" Gary asked. "You've done it before, or something like that, haven't you?"

"I was Professor in Chief at NASA for several years, if that's what you're referring to," Frank replied. "It's not like managing a new company, though. I'm not really a motor-man, either."

"You don't have to be a motor-man," Gary insisted to him. "You just need to direct the resources and run the business. Just like you ran the business at NASA."

"NASA wasn't really a business, not in the true sense, like a motor manufacturing company," said Frank. "Anyway, wouldn't Henry be more suitable to be MD – he'd know all about the motors – he designed them."

"I get the impression Henry's just too laid back to be an MD," Gary commented. "I don't think he's really the man I'm looking for."

"Well I'm most flattered to be considered," said Frank. "Do you have any idea where this position will be located?"

"Well, between you and me, there's a site west of Sacramento, where we may be considering to locate a new factory, but other than that I can't really say any more," Gary told him.

"I'll bear your offer in mind," Frank responded. "I don't usually rush into making decisions, but I'll give this one some thought. When do you want an answer by?"

"Oh there's no rush just yet," said Gary. "We've still got to make a final decision on where to locate the factory, but I'll keep you informed of any developments."

"You've got my mobile number, but would you like my home telephone number and email site address, too?" Frank offered.

"Yes please, if you wouldn't mind," said Gary.

Frank then gave the details to Gary, before shaking his hand once again, and leaving the room to catch up with the others. He met them waiting in reception, where they asked where he'd been. Frank said he went to the Gents', and as the others thought nothing more of it, they left State Hall and walked to the car.

Before driving off, Dermot suggested to drive to the coast, though Henry suggested to head into the hills. Frank suggested this too, though he quite liked the idea to see if there were any observatories. Arthur wasn't too fussed, either way, at which point Dermot suggested to go for a drink instead. Frank then suggested to buy a bottle of champagne instead, as a celebration, to which the others all agreed.

The One That Got Away

The following morning, Frank, Henry, Arthur and Dermot drove to Sacramento airport, where they met Gary. Gary gave them their flight tickets, so they could book-in, after which Arthur handed the keys to the digital car to Gary. He stayed for a while talking to the four of them, before they bid farewell as they left for Departures.

The four of them took the 12.25 flight to Colorado Springs, where Jeanette came to pick them up at the airport. Frank offered to put Henry, Arthur and Dermot up for the evening, to which Jeanette (eventually) agreed to, after the others treated Frank and Jeanette to a meal in town that night.

Henry, Arthur and Dermot were up early the next morning, preparing for Frank to take them to the airport. At the airport, Frank bumped into Clint, who had just returned after spending a few extra days in Houston. He mentioned that he had met Steve, who had now been discharged from hospital, and that he helped him recuperate. By this time, Henry, Arthur and Dermot had booked-in, so Frank and Clint went to sit down for a chat, as they had a lot to catch up on over the past week.

On the flight back to Gatwick, while Dermot seemed to be asleep on the plane, Arthur asked Henry when the most suitable time would be to install the solar panels in his house on Tenerife.

"Do you know when your chaps can come and fit the solar panels to my house?" Arthur asked Henry. "Would it be possible if they could connect it to the electricity?"

"That's all part of the job," Henry told him. "You know I'm going to have to

charge you for the flight and labour?"

"You can send them via a low-cost airline," said Arthur.

"I don't think low-cost airlines operate to Tenerife," Henry replied. "I suppose I can try to arrange for them to catch a non-full vacational flight."

"I suppose to save money, they could drive to Tenerife in one of your new cars," Arthur suggested. "They could bring my new sports car over."

"As long as you pay for their flight back," Henry said to him. "It wouldn't be very easy to drive to Tenerife - I doubt anyone would want to drive through Israel and the Gaza strip."

"They wouldn't have to come that way," Arthur insisted. "They could drive through Spain, cross the Med' at it's narrowest point, and through Morocco."

"Do many ships sail daily from Morocco to Tenerife?" asked Henry.

"I don't really know," said Arthur.

"Well can you find out before I make any arrangements for Gaspar and Gonchaves?" Henry instructed.

"Are you sure you have enough to put down to buy those 'shares' in the new business?" Arthur then asked him.

"I think so," said Henry. "We need to increase our car sales before I can have enough money, but I suppose I can always sell the shares in my business."

"Who would you sell them to?" Arthur queried.

"Lucas and Ramondo, probably," Henry told him. "Besides, I have a few more ideas in the pipeline."

"Oh, what might they be?" Arthur asked inquisitively.

"I think the power of the sea should be used to much greater advantage," Henry told him. "On many occasions, the seas around the UK alone are too fierce for ships to sail. The sea's energy should be harnessed in a similar way to wind power."

"How would you harness the nautical energy?" queried Arthur.

"Imagine two windbreakers stretching out half a mile," Henry said to him.

"Then imagine the energy of the sea if the windbreakers pointed inward diagonally to one point. This would leave a large wave, or indeed, series of waves."

"And the waves could drive a turbine at that point," Arthur worked out.

"Brilliant!"

"I don't know why no-one ever thought of something like that before," said Henry.

"Thinking about it, I would say that wave power has probably greater

energy than wind power," added Arthur. "The waves are always in motion, to varying degrees."

"Exactly," agreed Henry.

"What do you plan to do?" asked Arthur.

"I'm not too sure really," admitted Henry. "I want to pass this suggestion on to an energy company, but how much interest they'll take is anyone's guess?"

"You could consult a coastal council about this," Arthur suggested to him.

"I could, but living in the Pennines, I don't get much access to coastal council matters," said Henry. "Besides, it takes ages before anything is done in the UK."

"I know local residents are usually up in arms about any development or change to the land, but I'm sure if you informed local residents of the financial benefits, you'd get them on your side," Arthur commented.

"But that's the responsibility of the energy companies," Henry told him. "I can't do much until they're on board."

"How would you harness the nautical energy?" queried Arthur.

Though Dermot seemed to be snoozing, little did they know that he wasn't actually asleep and could hear their discussion. Dermot was an ecologist at heart and could see two excellent ideas to make the world greener. He also had ecological friends in high places on the Kerry County Council, and a relative in an energy company in his native Ireland.

When the three of them arrived at Gatwick airport, they each went their separate ways. Dermot took the first flight to Paris while Arthur had a look at flights to Tenerife and whether any were ordinary flights rather than just holiday excursions. Henry rang Lucas on his mobile, and told him he'd be at Leeds/Bradford airport within the next couple of hours, and told him to be there by 6pm to pick him up.

When Henry told Lucas about the agreement that had been made, Lucas was pleased and a little excited.

"Congratulations," he said to Henry as he looked around him before driving off.

"I shouldn't get too excited just yet," Henry then told him. "I may have to sell my current business."

Lucas wasn't so excited anymore.

"Don't worry," Henry then said to him. "If I were to sell shares in the business, it would be to you and Ramondo, and perhaps other members of my team, if they're interested."

"How much money do you think I'd need to buy part of the company?"

asked Lucas.

"I'm not too sure at the moment," admitted Henry. "I've drawn up an expenditure sheet for the business. I'll work out the value from there."

"How am I going to get my hands on significant amounts of money?" Lucas then asked. "I don't think the banks are going to want to lend any just now. Do you think you could wangle my bank account?"

"Possibly," said Henry. "But I'm going to have to 'amend' my account too, at some time. And I'll probably have to do this to a few other accounts as well."

"Don't worry about that," said Lucas. "I'll sort that out. Besides, it probably won't look too suspicious as we all have accounts with different banks. Plus we haven't been with them too long, so we won't have to go back too far when amending our records."

"Just be careful," Henry told him. "The last thing I want is to see you or any other member of my team going to prison for fraud. I probably won't require the money up front just yet, anyway."

"Why's that?" asked Lucas.

"The factory has got to be constructed first," Henry told him. "I sensed that it will be located at a disused site belonging to the state of California. That should reduce the cost of shares I may purchase."

"Don't worry, Major, I'll be okay," Lucas told him. "Ramondo can do a bit of 'amending' too. The sooner we amend our accounts the better. At least if we start our accounts from a higher point, people shouldn't suspect too much."

"Well let me check my finances first – I may not need to sell the whole of the current business," Henry then said to him. "We'll see what the others have to say about this too, before you or Ramondo do any 'amending'. Can you stick to producing Major motors, for now."

"I suppose you'll want to increase production?" Lucas queried.

"I intend to send Robinson and Frickas down to Skipton on a more regular basis," Henry told him.

"How about Gaspar and Gonchaves?" asked Lucas.

"I've got something else lined up for them," said Henry. "I have a feeling that they may end up with their own business. I don't know what though, at the moment, I just have a hunch. In the meantime, I'd like you to do two runs a day to that obsolete quarry in Nidderdale. Replicate more motors."

"We haven't got a car showroom, though," Lucas pointed out. "Where are we going to display the motors?"

"We'll replicate a showroom," Henry told him. "Do like we did when we

first arrived at Ribblehead Cottage. Do you remember the state that place was in?"

"It was derelict, broken and full of mice, and God knows what else," Lucas recalled.

"Exactly," said Henry. "If we can sort that place out in one evening, it shouldn't take too long to create a showroom on the current premises in Skipton."

"Would you want us to do it overnight?" asked Lucas.

"Preferably," replied Henry. "I want to take the least risk in people finding out what we're doing. If that means renovating the front of the premises overnight, then so be it."

"I suppose we'll have enough space available for a new showroom?" Lucas queried. "We could build a new showroom somewhere else."

"Let's sort the premises at Skipton, first," Henry told him. "We'll need planning permission. Mind you, I suppose it wouldn't harm applying for planning permission now - these matters take so long to go through in this country."

On route, Henry had a change of idea, though this was just to invite the others to meet them at The Ribblehead Inn. After Henry finished his meal, he informed the others what had been agreed, and that he may have to sell his business. He said that he didn't want it to be the end of Major Motors, and that they had the option to buy shares in the company.

The others weren't sure what to think about that. Lucas and Ramondo seemed confident enough to start their own business, but they each agreed they couldn't do without a more experienced leader like Henry. Some of the older members began to wonder whether they made the right choice in coming to Earth, though they didn't say anything as such.

Gaspar and Gonchaves were a little happier when Henry informed them about the solar panel installation they could do at Arthur's house. Henry re-assured them all, however, that none of them would be left behind, and that he would ensure they would be well looked-after.

The next day, Henry went to look on the web for Leeds/Bradford airport, where he checked the departures for Tenerife. Though there were no regular flights, there were several holiday excursion flights each week, mainly on Wednesdays. He contacted each travel company, and managed to arrange a cheap flight for Gaspar and Gonchaves to catch, so they could go to install the solar panels that Arthur had requested.

Before they flew out, Dermot queried the installation with Arthur. Arthur

was a little surprised, as he thought Dermot had been asleep when he and Henry discussed the matter on the plane to Gatwick, but didn't deny the case. He agreed with Dermot's suggestion that solar panels could be installed in the observatory. It shouldn't require a great deal of planning permission, as the observatory was located high on Tenerife, near the dormant volcano of Mount Teide.

By the time Gaspar and Gonchaves arrived at Arthur's, it had been agreed with Henry to install solar panels on the observatory, too. This was in Henry's interest, as he received the payments for the work, as it was his staff from his business, and paid his staff their share.

Gaspar and Gonchaves took their replicator with them, and measured the size of the panels needed for Arthur's installation. They replicated the panels high in the wilderness near Mount Teide. It took less than a week before the solar panels had been installed, and the electricity and gas had been disconnected from the mains and reconnected to the new power supply of the solar energy operator. This worked like the SEB on the solar car.

Gaspar and Gonchaves relaxed for a few days before they went to sort the solar panels required for the observatory. This required larger panels, and so it took over a week to fully install and reconnect the energy supply for the observatory.

While they were installing the panels, coaches from various hotels on Tenerife passed the observatory. The work carried out was being noticed and reported around the island. Members of the local council looked at what had been agreed, and thought a little more about it. Hotel managers were hearing about this, too.

It was while Gaspar and Gonchaves were back at Ribblehead Cottage, the following week, that Arthur rang Henry to inform him of a request to carry out similar work on a hotel on Tenerife, and whether Gaspar and Gonchaves could be released to carry out the work.

"I've been sending them to Skipton, to help Lucas and Ramondo replicate new digital cars," Henry told Arthur. "I can release them to Tenerife, though, as I'm not aware of any other schedules they currently have due."

"It's not really urgent," said Arthur. "Apparently, one of my colleagues had been speaking to a hotel manager, who is interested in having a similar installation. The hotel hasn't said the work is due by any specific date."

"Interesting," said Henry. "Do you know if it's a large hotel?"

"I don't really know," Arthur replied. "I can have a word with my colleague."

"It sounds like word is getting about on your island," Henry said to him. "Can you go back to your colleague, or better still, to the hotel manager, and tell him that my men will be available in a few weeks. See what the manager says."

"Will do," said Arthur. "All this extra workload should help your bank balance, and any shares you're going to purchase in the new company over in California."

"I certainly hope so," Henry said to him. "I'm not a greedy man, like some other people on this planet, so I will ensure my men get their fare dues."

"You may not need to sell your business, after all," said Arthur.

"We'll see," replied Henry. "I intend to sell some of it, if only to Lucas and Ramondo, as they've had a lot of the input."

"How is the business coming along, by the way?" asked Arthur.

"I've arranged to increase our volume of cars," Henry told him. "I also intend to open a new showroom, for the increase in volume."

"Well I'll wish you the best of luck," Arthur said to him. "I'll have to go now. I'll try to find out a bit more about the hotel manager. I'll let you know how I get on, cheerio."

It didn't take long to set up the new car showroom. Henry went on the internet to advertise this. By this time, he had got to know a good few people, like Greg, the owner of the Ribblehead Inn, who had agreed to buy one of Henry's digital saloon cars, which were now named D1. Greg had shown the car to some of his friends, who also became interested in the model. Richard Copeland had also purchased a D1, and word was now getting around about the D1 and its sporty model, the Green Machine.

Quite a few people visited the new showroom, some came to purchase a new vehicle while others merely came to speculate or view the quality on offer. Amongst the visitors was a reporter for a motoring magazine in Leeds, who was rather impressed with all the models on show. Before compiling the report on them, he requested the RAC to examine the D1 and the the Green Machine, and for the AA to examine the S1 and S2, the similar solar vehicles.

The RAC reports on the D1 and the the Green Machine were excellent and praised the models. They even purchased one of each. The AA reports on the S1 and S2 were both favourable, though they commented whether solar-powered cars were really suitable for the UK. After the reporter examined each report, he purchased a Green Machine, and

reported about each model in his magazine.

By the time October came around, sales from the showroom were doing very well indeed. The cars were priced at around £10,000, which seemed very reasonable. Many people were tempted to purchase them, as they did not rely on petrol, which had shot up over the past year. This caused a minor problem in that Henry had to arrange for further pick-ups of written-off cars. He decided to replicate another pick-up truck, and send two more of his staff to Skipton to help with the collection of the write-offs'. He also thought it wouldn't seem right for two future shareholders of a motor manufacturer to be seen collecting written-off cars, particularly at a time when Major Motors was on the up.

Henry was by now receiving quite a few inquiries, as he had given his telephone number on the Major Motors website, though one morning he received a more familiar call.

"Hi Henry, how are you doing?" Professor Frank Marshall asked him, after he had answered the call.

"Oh, I'm fine, thanks, as is the business," Henry said to him.

"That's good, that's good," said Frank. "Producing a few more vehicles?"

"Yes thanks," replied Henry. "We've set up a new car sales showroom and I've had to increase my establishment, and car production."

"Good, good, you may be able to do something for me pretty soon," said Frank. "Things are going pretty well here, too. The final planning hurdle has now been completed, without a hitch. Construction, or should I say reconstruction, of the old site into a car manufacturing plant will now commence in a few weeks time."

"That's excellent news," said Henry. "Have you any idea when it will open?"

"Not as yet, but I believe it will be sometime in the new year, probably about March," Frank informed him. "I've had some good news of my own, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, what might that be?" asked Henry.

"I've been appointed Managing Director of the new company," Frank told him. "I thought Gary would be the MD, but he's too busy with other businesses. Apparently, he's the Chief Executive of the holding company."

"Congratulations," Henry said to him. "I suppose you're going to crack open another bottle of champagne?"

"I can't say I'm really struck on champagne," Frank admitted. "Actually, I wasn't too sure whether to take the role, as I only moved to Colorado just

over a year ago. I didn't really fancy moving another thousand miles again, but in the end, the offer was too good to turn down."

"Well, I can't fault you for that," said Henry. "As MD of the new company, when do you want my payment by, or should I send it to Gary?"

"Can you send the payment to me, please," Frank requested. "There's no hurry at the moment, but if you can get the money to me by next week, that would be fine. Arthur says he'll have his ready by then, and I've got Dermot's installment."

"Did you say I may be able to do something for you?" Henry then queried.

"Oh yes, yes," said Frank. "We've had a few inquiries about your vehicles over here apparently. Do you think you could send us some over?"

"Certainly," Henry replied. "How many would you require? Ten perhaps?"

"Ten should be okay for now," said Frank. "How much are you charging for them?"

"We're selling the models below their market value at the moment," Henry told Frank, unsure precisely what to say, as the cars had been replicated from write-offs. "We want to gain a march on our competitors, undercut most manufacturers, so that we can get a foothold in the market."

"How much precisely do they cost?" Frank asked again.

"The S1 and D1 are ten thousand pounds," Henry told him. "The sports models are on sale at twelve thousand pounds."

"That's interesting," said Frank. "Do you think you could send us over twenty new models - five of each? That could count as part of your payment, or would you prefer to bill the company for them, and you send me your payment next week?"

"I don't mind," said Henry. "I should have twenty ready for you by next week. You send me an agreement about my payment when you've received the motors."

"I'll probably do that, but I'll have to put you in touch with Gary, as they'll have to be delivered to Sacramento," said Frank. "Let me know when the motors are ready."

Just then Frank heard the doorbell ring. He expected Jeanette to answer the door, but then heard it ring again.

"I'm afraid someone's at the door," Frank said to Henry. "I'd better go and answer it, as it seems no-one else is going to."

"I'll leave you to it for now," replied Henry. "I'll catch up with you by the weekend. I'll let you know how the car production is coming on. Cheerio for now."

Frank said farewell to Henry, before going to the front door, which rang

again. When he opened the door, there was Clint, together with his former NASA scientist, Steve di Pierri.

“Well hello there,” he said with surprise as he greeted them before walking over to Steve and hugged him. “Is it good to see you again. Come on in, come on in, I’m sure we’ve a lot to discuss.”

“It’s good to see you, too, Frank,” said Steve, who was hobbling on crutches. “This looks a nice place you have here.”

"Yeah, it's not too bad," replied Frank. "Not as large as the house Jeanette and I had near Houston, but a lot more peaceful."

"Where is Jeanette, by the way?" Clint asked before he closed the front door.

"I'm not sure really. I thought she was upstairs, painting her nails or whatever women do, but I didn't see the car outside just then, so I presume she's gone into town," said Frank, before turning to Steve again. "So, what brings you here?"

"I needed to get away from Houston," Steve told him. "Clint offered to put me and Laura up for a few nights, so we thought we'd take up the invitation."

"It was the least I could do," admitted Clint. "They put me up for a few extra nights while I was in Texas, a few months ago."

"That was mainly because the guy helped me recuperate, coming out of hospital," Steve insisted.

"Where are your children?" Frank asked Steve. "They haven't come along as well?"

"They're staying with my brother-in-law back in Houston," Steve replied. "Mike wanted to stay at home and look after our house by himself, but Laura and me don't think we can trust him just yet."

"How old is Mike now?" asked Frank. "He must be about sixteen."

"Seventeen, actually," Steve informed him. "It was his birthday a few weeks ago. Our daughter Helena is now fourteen. We did consider letting them stay at home, but we can't trust either of them. They chuck their clothes all over the floor, leave plates all over the place, and don't tidy up after them."

"That's today's kids all over," commented Clint. "I offered to take Laura here, but she decided to go in town with Mary. Perhaps they'll meet Jeanette."

"They could do," said Frank. "I'm sure they'll have a lot to discuss."

"And spend," said Clint, to which Frank and Steve laughed. "Women!"

"Say, would either of you fancy a drink?" Frank asked Clint and Steve, as he walked over to the drinks cabinet. "Something stiff, maybe?"

"Why not?" said Steve. "I'm not driving, and I ain't had a stiff one for quite a while – a stiff drink I mean! I've lived like a recluse for nearly six months, now."

"How about you, Clint?" asked Frank. "Would you like a Scotch, or perhaps you'd fancy something a bit different?"

"Nahh," said Clint. "I'll have a Bud', if you've got a bottle. I won't be driving

too far, but I think I'd better keep off the hard stuff."

"Do you still keep in touch with your family, these days?" Steve asked Frank.

"Not as much as we used to," Frank admitted. "We still phone them regularly, and we get emails from our lads, but quite frankly, if you'll pardon the pun, they're old enough to live their own lives now."

"Clint's been telling me there's a fairly large observatory near here," Steve queried.

"Yes, Pikes Peak," Frank told him. "It's only about half-a-dozen miles up the road. Pretty good views too, though I may not be going there quite so often in future."

"Oh? Why's that?" asked Clint.

"I've accepted the offer of Managing Director for that new motor manufacturing company me and Dermot and those other guys have set up," Frank replied.

"Congratulations," Steve said to him. "I knew you weren't old enough to retire last year."

"So does that mean you'll be moving away?" Clint queried.

"Probably," said Frank. "The car plant will be based in California, though it won't be ready for a while yet."

"California, eh?" said Steve. "I wouldn't mind moving there myself, if I had half a chance."

"Oh it's not going to be located in Hollywood, or even on the coast," Frank told him. "The car plant will be located to the west of Sacramento, about one hundred miles from San Francisco."

"Will that be producing this digital motor Clint's been telling me all about?" asked Steve. "Apparently it's been designed by some guy from outer space!"

Frank seemed unsure as to who Steve was referring to, as Henry had wiped the memory of what Arthur had told him. Or had he?

"He means Arthur, that little guy with the white hair and balding forehead we met at the astronomer's convention in San Bernardino earlier this year," Clint explained.

Frank knew who he was referring to, but still seemed unsure, though he began to think to himself.

"Are you okay Frank?" Clint asked, as he walked over to him.

"You look like you're having an epileptic fit," added Steve.

"I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm just trying to get it all in perspective," said Frank, to which Steve killed himself laughing because he thought Frank was being

sarcastic, as he couldn't believe the story that Clint had told him, about the man from outer space.

"It's true, I tell you," Clint insisted to Steve as he looked at Frank. "You haven't forgotten about what Arthur told us already, have you?"

"No, I haven't," said Frank, as he went to pick up his glass of Scotch. "I mean I did...but I remember it now."

"Are you sure you're okay, Frank?" Steve then queried with him.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Frank said again. "I guess I must have forgotten about it all, what with the car project, and everything that came with it."

"Are you telling me that you and Clint really met some guy who claimed to be from outer space at the astronomer's convention?" queried a puzzled Steve.

"He wasn't some sort of little green man who'd stand out in a crowd," Frank told him. "He was just like one of us, like an ordinary human being."

"So what did he look like?" asked Steve, curiously.

"Didn't Clint just say what he looked like?" queried Frank.

"Yeah, yeah, but I want to hear it from you," Steve told him, ever more curious that perhaps what Clint had told him wasn't a hoax after all.

"He's a short guy, about five foot seven," said Frank. "He has white hair with a large, bald forehead, and speaks like a university English professor, and has what you'd consider a typical old English name, Arthur. If he hadn't told us what he did, we'd never have guessed he wasn't from Earth."

"You talk about him as though you saw him yesterday," Steve then queried.

"I have seen him since the convention," Frank told him. "I last saw him a couple of months ago."

"Where? Here?" asked Steve in disbelief.

"Yes, he came here with another guy, a black guy from the UK, Henry," said Frank. "We went to Sacramento together to present the new motors."

"You see, I told you it wasn't some fairy story," Clint said to Steve. "Mind you, if anyone told that to me, I probably wouldn't have believed them."

"So, if this guy is from outer space, why didn't we get to hear about it on TV?" Steve asked.

"Arthur only told us," said Frank. "He also asked us to keep this a secret, as he only told us by mistake."

"When he heard that the Governor of California was once Mr Universe, he thought that he was actually from outer space, too," added Clint.

"I don't disbelieve you, but I find it all difficult to acknowledge," Steve admitted to Frank and Clint.

"Oh I admit, it is very difficult to believe," said Clint. "We found it difficult to believe, too."

Frank just nodded his head in agreement. He had recalled some of what Arthur had said, but was still trying to remember other parts of it. He could recall the asteroid easy enough though, as this had never been 'cleared' from his memory.

"You're telling me that this guy Arthur lived on that asteroid that ended up orbiting Earth?" Steve queried. "That asteroid couldn't support life - it was too small to support anything and too elongated to have any gravity to hold anything on it's voyage."

"He didn't live on the asteroid," Clint emphasised. "Arthur lived in the asteroid."

"Are you saying that thing was a space craft in disguise?" Steve again queried in disbelief.

"You remember how strange the asteroid was, don't you?" Frank then asked him. "It was travelling at speeds we could never have imagined. And on top of that, it's speed reduced more than once."

"But we thought that happened when it approached the Kuyper belt and the asteroid belt," said Steve.

"Come on Steve, no ordinary asteroid could travel at the speeds that asteroid travelled at, you know that," Frank replied. "And no ordinary asteroid would have disappeared like that one."

"Even if it had exploded into millions of tiny pieces, we would have noticed it on Earth," added Clint. "Instead it just disappeared, never to be seen again."

Frank then recalled that Arthur had said he saw a similar asteroid in the inner asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter and told Clint and Steve so.

"You don't suppose that's the same one?" asked Steve.

"I don't know, I don't know," said Frank. "What I will say is that we shouldn't discount this. All this may sound weird, but Copernicus was laughed at when he proposed the Earth revolved around the sun, and Galileo was disowned by the church."

"I accept that, but surely, if you informed some official body about this, they would have taken the matter a lot more seriously than the church may have done four hundred years ago," Steve insisted.

At this point, Clint and Frank looked at each other, each unsure whether to inform Steve of what else they were suspicious of.

"Are you two having me on?" Steve asked. "Or is there something else I should know?"

Frank and Clint looked at each other again, to which Clint nodded to Frank, as if to gesture to let Steve know.

"This is confidential information," Frank then told Steve. "This is to remain secret, between the three of us."

"You know me, Frank, I'm not the sort of person to devolve anything confidential," Steve replied.

"You recall I took early retirement last year?" Frank then said to Steve.

"Well that wasn't actually my intention."

"What are you saying, Frank?" Steve asked him curiously.

"I was 'offered' to retire," said Frank. "I was given an offer I couldn't turn down. And when I signed on the dotted line, I was asked to close the case on the asteroid."

"I thought it seemed odd you retired with such short notice," said Steve. "I thought it was odd when you closed the asteroid case, too. Who said this to you?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to say," Frank told him.

Steve then thought about this all for a few moments.

"Are you trying to tell me that someone senior, somewhere, tried to get rid of me?" he asked.

"We're not trying to incriminate anyone, but we'll let you draw your own conclusions," Clint replied.

"But no-one else has been attacked, or blown to smithereens," Steve stated.

"That's probably because you're the only person who tried to re-open the case," Clint told him. "Besides, someone else here has been targeted."

"You mean to say one of you was shot at?" an astounded Steve queried.

"When was this?"

"You were in hospital at the time, but you must have heard about an attempted assassination of the Governor of California, at the convention earlier this year," Clint told him, at which point he turned to Frank.

"It was me the assassin was after," Frank confessed.

"How did you work that one out?" asked Steve, at which point Frank and Clint looked at one another.

"Arthur told us," said Frank.

"Is this the guy from outer space again?" Steve queried. "I suppose he could see the assassin up on the stanchion, or wherever he was, and used his Darth Vader force to bring the assassin down."

"Pretty much," said Clint.

"I think we've said too much about this case already," Frank then suggested. "I'd appreciate it if you kept this to yourself please. Is that okay Steve?"

"That's fine by me," he replied

"So, tell me, how are you feeling to be out of hospital?" Frank asked him.

"Great," said Steve. "I was treated well in there, but I did get fed up in the end, just lying around all day long."

"It looked a pretty good hospital," commented Clint. "Presumably it was private."

"Oh yeah," said Steve. "At least my life assurance hasn't been wasted."

"Will you be going back to NASA when you're back on your own two feet once again?" asked Frank.

"Probably, but in what capacity I don't know," said Steve. "I don't see as there'd be any problem picking up from where I left off, but I'm not really sure I want to go and do the same thing."

"Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to diversify, to move somewhere else, into another field perhaps?" Clint suggested.

"To be honest, after what you two have been telling me, I'm not too sure I want to go back to Houston, to tell you the truth," Steve admitted. "The thing is, it's not just my life that would be affected if we moved away."

"Do you think Laura would mind?" asked Frank. "How about your children?"

"Well that's just it," said Steve. "I'm pretty sure Laura would quite like to move to somewhere like this, and to get away from Texas. We don't want to disrupt our children's education, though especially at such an important stage."

"Do you still hear from colleagues at NASA?" asked Frank.

"Quite a few people came to visit early on, but Robert's the only person who came to visit me regularly," said Steve.

"How is Rob these days?" Clint asked.

"Rob's fine," said Steve. "He was covering my role while I was in hospital."

"How has the new Astronomer-in-chief, Dr Ferguson, been?" asked Frank.

"We didn't get to see much of him at the convention."

"Dr Ferguson seems okay," said Steve. "He came to visit me once, though he didn't stay long. Rob invited him along once or twice but apparently he was too busy."

"Dr Ferguson seemed okay," said Clint.

"Have either of you heard anything from Corny recently?" asked Steve, at

which point Clint and Frank looked at each other again. "He hasn't been shot or blown up, has he?"

"Not as far as we're aware," Clint added. "Last time I rang his number, I was informed that he'd been sent to Afghanistan."

"When was this?" asked Steve.

"About four months ago," said Clint. "It was while we were at the convention."

"Shouldn't he be back by now?" Steve queried. "I've got his number somewhere on me, I'll give him a ring. I used to contact him before my 'accident'."

Steve rang Cornelius' number on his mobile. Corny's daughter answered the call. She recognized Steve's voice, even though she hadn't heard from him for a while. When he asked about her father however, she told Steve that he had been requested to remain in Afghanistan for a few more months. She didn't seem too sure what was going on, but suspected something, somewhere.

After Steve wished her well and finished the call, he told this to Clint and Frank, who each seemed pessimistic. Before they said anymore about the matter, Frank brought up the new business once again, in order to change the subject.

Frank was feeling ever-confident about the new business, and had a few people in mind for some roles. He wanted an engineer, preferably someone young and with a view to combating global warming, at which point Steve mentioned that a couple of engineers may be made redundant at NASA.

"Why's that?" asked Frank.

"I don't know really, I only heard this from Rob a couple of weeks ago," admitted Steve.

"It probably has something to do with the credit crunch," speculated Clint.

"He's right, you know," said Frank. "Even NASA will be affected by financial constraints at a time like this."

"Aren't you a bit apprehensive, starting a new business in a recession?" asked Steve.

"To be honest, I haven't had time to think about the current financial situation," Frank admitted. "The business won't begin to take off until next year anyway, as the factory has to be completed and positions to be formalised and filled first. Say, aren't you considering diverging from your current role?"

"I am considering what I should do next, but I don't think I'm cut-out to be

a car manufacturer," Steve replied.

"I never really thought of you as shop floor staff," Frank chuckled. "No, I thought you might fancy something like a production analyst. Even before we can start to consider vehicle production, we first need to analyse the market, where we can get the best sales, what types of models have the biggest demand, which sort of society would most want an environmentally-friendly vehicle."

"We don't have the best environmental record in the world," Clint reminded him.

"You've analysed plenty of data over the years," Frank emphasised to Steve. "This should be right up your street."

"I'll have a little think about it," Steve replied politely.

"Well if you're considering quitting NASA and looking for something to keep you going, just let me know," Frank told him.

"Do you really think the American public will want to purchase new environmentally-friendly vehicles during a recession?" asked Steve.

"They should do. They have to," said Frank. "Above all else though, if we have the Governor of California to advertise our product, I'm sure we'll receive plenty of orders for the new vehicles."

"I wish I had your optimism," Clint sighed.

"Are you due to receive compensation for what you suffered?" Frank then asked Steve.

"I have a lawyer on the case, but quite frankly, pardon the pun, I don't have a lot of confidence in the matter," Steve confessed.

"Why's that?" asked Frank.

"The thing is, no-one's been caught for the incident," said Steve.

"Surely there must be a CCTV at the car park where the incident occurred?" queried Clint

"Surely you should be entitled to something," said Frank. "Even if the FBI can't find the perpetrator, you should be entitled to something as what happened was a terrorist action."

"Unfortunately, I don't think the Texas state authorities see it like that," Steve told him. "It seems that there were no suspicious movements captured on the CCTV, so there's nothing to go on."

"Surely the local police should have raised this case on TV, to ask for any witnesses who may have recalled seeing someone or something unusual," Frank insisted.

"I don't really know," said Steve. "All I know is that Rob said he couldn't remember seeing anything about the case on TV. No cops came to see

me in hospital."

"Sounds dodgy to me," Clint commented. "I think you'd be best to lye low for a while."

"On reflection, I think I will," said Steve. "Hey, Frank you know what, you sound several years younger," Steve said to Frank. "You remind me of how you were years ago, when we were planning that venture to Mars. Before that asteroid came along."

"Thanks," said Frank "America is slowly coming round to the fact that increased pollution is creating an unfriendly and unsafe environment. If the temperatures increase at the current rate there will be catastrophic consequences - we're already seeing the effects."

Frank remembered a telephone conversation with Arthur, where he was told of the possible consequences to the planet if nothing was done to combat global warming. He then gave a brief lecture of this to Clint and Steve.

"It won't affect us in our lifetimes," said Clint, who had accepted that global warming could happen, but was still a little sceptical about it all.

"Even if it doesn't affect us, it will affect our children," Frank emphasised to him.

"With all due respects to both of you, I'll probably still be around when the worst affects take hold on the planet," said Steve.

"You could, you could indeed," confessed Frank. "The thing is, global warming is happening all around us today. It's just taken a long time for anyone to take any real notice. I didn't take a great deal of notice at first, but it's all occurred in a gradual process. The rainfall is heavier, the summers are hotter, hurricanes are more violent."

"Let's hope the new president takes more notice of these factors than the outgoing one," Steve commented.

"Oh he'll have to," replied Frank. "It won't be long 'til the next hurricane strikes New Orleans. And the next president should show more support to the people in that region of the US."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," said Clint.

"Well, either way, we'll have a new president elected by the end of the year, who should be more pro-active with the situation," said Frank.

"Do you reckon we're going through a period of transition?" Steve asked him.

"Oh indeed we are, one way or another," said Frank. "Either global warming will continue to increase until factors become intolerable, by which time it will probably be too late, or we may be on the verge of

developing new systems and appliances which are environmentally-friendly."

"Let's hope it's the latter," said Steve. "Do you think the likes of China will come on-board for green issues?"

"I think they will come onboard, sooner or later," replied Frank. "It's just a question of when, and whether it will be too late."

The Warm, The Wet and The Windy

Back on Tenerife, society was becoming more pro-active to global warming. While Gaspar and Gonchaves were fitting solar panels to a hotel on the island, requests for similar work came through for two more hotels. This was good news for Henry, whose business received payments for the work carried out, though Gaspar and Gonchaves were becoming rather busy. They wanted to ask Henry if they could take on an assistant, but were unsure what to say to him, so asked Arthur to speak to him.

Arthur was fine about the two of them staying in his house temporarily, but it seemed this was becoming indefinite with the additional work coming in. He spoke to Henry about this, though he knew it would probably mean someone else staying with him, temporarily at least.

Henry was reluctant at first, as he had already sent Robinson and Frickas to help Lucas and Ramondo with the new cars. Arthur asked what role Zebrina was doing, to which he said not a lot. Arthur suggested that she could help Lucas and Ramondo, while one of the others could go to assist Gaspar and Gonchaves. Though Henry wasn't too keen on this suggestion at first, he eventually saw the logic, and agreed to it.

Henry was more concerned about getting the twenty motors to California. First of all, it meant liaising with more scrap yards for written-off cars. Then, once they were produced, they had to be delivered to Heathrow airport. First of all he considered replicating a motor transportation lorry, but realised this would need several cars worth to be replicated. Then he remembered none of his lads had a licence to use such a vehicle.

In the end, Henry managed to wangle this, and replicated a 6-vehicle transporter. He decided to transport six motors on three separate runs, and to take another car along himself on two of the runs. He also had to pay for the use of parking the cars at Heathrow, and of course, for their transportation to California. This too, wasn't easy, as the motors were flown to San Francisco. Fortunately, Henry had already arranged with

Frank for the motors to be picked up there. All in all, it cost him £25,000, but with the money coming in for the hotel work, it wasn't a problem at this time of recession.

By the time this had been sorted, there was some more positive news on the way from Tenerife. Arthur noticed an envelope from the energy suppliers. It was a three-monthly bill, so he opened it. He noticed the bill was less than usual. What's more, this only took in one month since the solar paneling had been installed, which suggested that though there had been a reduction, the full savings were not yet evident.

Arthur made sure word of this got around the island. Before Gaspar and Gonchaves had commenced work on one their final order, further requests for solar paneling came in from other hotels on Tenerife. Gaspar and Gonchaves requested further support. Henry could see this becoming a business in it's own right, so to keep them happy and behind him, agreed to send Robinson to help Gaspar and Gonchaves. They too, could see the potential and considered whether they should go their own way.

Amidst all of this, Henry found time to go online, where he put forward the suggestion of developing wave power to several energy companies, which he had discussed with Arthur. Unfortunately, he didn't receive any response, though he couldn't understand why. Perhaps it was because everyone was thinking of Christmas, which was fast approaching.

In the new year, Henry sent the suggestion to a few councils around the Scottish islands. This time, he did receive a response from The Western Isles council, based in Lewis, asking a little more about the idea. Henry put together a web site, which showed a large turbine on the edge of the coast, which was generated by the force of the waves. The turbine would generate energy, at a fraction of the cost of the current energy rates. It would also be cleaner, not relying upon coal or oil. Another benefit was that the scheme would ensure the UK was not reliant on foreign supplies. There was also a pair of 'breakers' each pointing diagonally inward towards the turbine, which increased the wave pressure as it approached the turbine.

Back in California, the motors Henry had sent had nearly all been sold. Frank asked if some more could be sent over, and even offered to pay for them and the transportation himself.

"Are you sure about this?" Henry asked him.

"Sure enough," Frank replied. "That's if it's okay by you?"

"Oh it's fine by me," Henry told him. "I'm just a little curious as to which

business they're to be sold under?"

"Come again?" Frank queried.

"Well, the motors manufactured over here belong to my business, Major Motors," Henry pointed out. "Are these vehicles being sold under my brand, or are you changing this before they go on display?"

"We didn't change the brand of the other motors sold," said Frank. "We don't have any intention to amend this. To be honest, I only suggested to put the motors of yours on sale as a stop-gap while the plant is under construction."

"Were you surprised the motors sold as quickly as they did?" Henry asked him.

"Yes and no," replied Frank. "I had every faith that they'd sell, though I was a little surprised how well, as we're supposed to be in a recession."

"Perhaps the recession hasn't hit California yet," said Henry.

"If there's anywhere the recession won't hit, it's California," said Frank.

"How is the construction on the car plant coming along?" Henry asked.

"Oh that's coming along just fine," Frank told him. "I can't say for certain when the plant will be ready, but it's certainly taking shape. We may wish to come and visit your site in the near future, to assess the machinery required for the new plant. "

"I'll have to sort that out with my engineers first," said Henry. "Have you arranged a name and identity for the new motor business yet? Presumably you won't be selling them under the name of Major Motors."

"Oh no," said Frank. "We're in the process of sorting an identity for the business. I'll let you know when it's confirmed."

"Congratulations on the new President," Henry then told Frank. "He should certainly help American foreign relations."

"He can't make them any worse than they already are," replied Frank. "I think the little guy running for Republicans would have helped. "

"I thought he had similar policies to the outgoing President?" Henry queried.

"Oh no, they were quite different in many ways," Frank told him. "That guy was a lot more professional about things. I've met the outgoing President, and believe me, he doesn't inspire confidence. It's hard to see him inspiring anyone, except a couple of clowns, perhaps."

Henry then told Frank about his latest venture, and asked him what he thought about the idea of wave power.

"It sounds a pretty good idea to me," Frank told him. "I'm not the best person to give advice on this matter, though. You probably want to speak

to Dermot for that.”

“Dermot?” queried Henry. “I wouldn’t have associated him with that sort of thing.”

“No, I wouldn’t have either, but he was telling me a couple of days ago about some project similar to the one you mentioned,” said Frank. “I think he said some friend of his back in Ireland was on a planning committee for that project.”

“Thanks for letting me know - I’ll give him a call sometime,” Henry said to him. “If you don’t mind, I’d better go and see my staff to arrange for another load of motors. I suppose you could come here to collect them, though on consideration, I wouldn’t mind coming to California again. We could bring the plans of our factory with us, to give you some idea of your car plant’s requirements.”

“That should be fine, but I’ll speak to the others, first,” Frank muttered. “So long for now then, I’ll see you ‘round.”

Henry thought about contacting Dermot, but was more concerned with sorting the machinery for his cars. Though he wouldn’t need to use any machinery to produce the cars he was selling, he knew he had to put up a ‘shop floor’ somewhere in his premises, in case someone made an unexpected visit.

Henry went to discuss this with Lucas and Ramondo, who had drawn up plans for such an event, but had never put this into practice. Together, they looked carefully at the plans, and after a few refinements, agreed on a plan of the required machinery for the premises.

“When do you want to put the machinery up?” Lucas asked Henry.

“Would tomorrow night be okay?” suggested Henry. “I’d rather this be done while there’s no-one around outside. We don’t want anyone looking in, do we?”

“Does that mean we don’t have to come in tomorrow morning?” asked Ramondo. “I thought you wanted us to prepare those vehicles to be sent to America?”

“Hhmm, good point,” Henry muttered. “Can Zebrina or Madaly use the replicator?”

“I think so,” said Ramondo. “You’re not suggesting they go and replicate the new vehicles, are you? I don’t think they’re really suited for that sort of thing, do you?”

“Hhmm, good point,” Henry muttered again. “We’ll just have to see how long the job takes. We can all help with replicating the next day, after we’ve had a good sleep.”

That was agreed by all three, after which Henry tried to contact Dermot, unsuccessfully. He tried to call Dermot on his home phone later that evening, though again, without success. Henry then had a long rest the next day, in order to prepare the new shop floor and its machinery.

As he had done with the showroom and with the help of Ramondo & Lucas, they put the design together in one evening. All was quiet in Skipton, as everyone was asleep. No-one noticed the construction, which by the early morning was complete.

The following evening, Henry called Dermot again. This time he managed to catch him.

"Bonsoir, Monsieuer O'Hagan," Dermot replied, as he answered the phone in his Paris residency.

"Hello, is that you Dermot?" queried Henry at the other end of the line.

"Oh hello there Henry," he replied. "How are you doing these days? Quite well, a little dickie bird tells me."

"I'm not going to get too carried away just yet, particularly in this current recession," Henry said to him. "Things do appear to be moving well, though, no small thanks to you."

"Oh, the solar energy project, you mean?" queried Dermot. "If Arthur hadn't brought it to my attention, I probably wouldn't have arranged the new energy supplies for the observatory in Tenerife."

"Well thanks anyway," said Henry. "If the solar paneling hadn't been carried out on the observatory, the hotels on the island may never have found out about the project."

"From what Arthur has been telling me, there's quite a few bookings for solar energy over the next few months," Dermot queried.

"Oh yes, the bookings are full," Henry acknowledged. "My men over there have been asking for more assistance, and I think they may need to get themselves their own premises."

"Do you think they'll end up staying out there?" asked Dermot.

"I don't really know," said Henry. "What I do know is that there are plenty of hotels all over Tenerife, plus many more on the neighbouring islands."

"It's just a pity you don't get a lot of sunshine in the UK," commented Dermot.

"I know, I know," sighed Henry. "However, I have another idea how we can transform energy from natural resources over here."

"Oh really," said Dermot wondering what Henry was going to say next.

"I've often wondered why we don't make better use of tidal forces,"

explained Henry. "Particularly as we are an island here in the UK, and that we are battered by some of the fiercest waves in the world."

Dermot didn't say anything at this point, as he could see where Henry was coming from.

"Can you imagine a large turbine, hanging from a frame in the sea?" queried Henry. "The waves could power the turbine. The greater the waves, the greater power produced from the turbine."

"The idea is fine," said Dermot. "It's a pity no-one else has come up with such an idea previously."

"Oh?" queried Henry. "Frank tells me that someone in Ireland has a similar scheme at the moment?"

"Oh yes, of course, of course, of course," Dermot mumbled.

"He told me that you know about this," added Henry.

"I don't really know a lot about it, other than it's passed the planning stage," said Dermot. "I only heard this from an old mate of mine."

"Is he with some energy company?" asked Henry. "We could do with the energy companies in the UK being encouraged to take up something like this."

"Oh he's only a councilor somewhere in Kerry," Dermot told him.

"Do you know what council he sits on?" Henry asked.

"Not off hand, I'm afraid," Dermot said, a little defensively. "They've changed council boundaries and jurisdiction in recent years, so I'm not too sure myself."

"Pity," remarked Henry. "I'd like to have a word with him, get an idea of the scheme, to see if we can collaborate on any ideas. Do you have your mate's telephone number, perhaps I could give him a ring?"

"I'm sorry, I can't remember his number off hand," Dermot answered. "I think he's had to move house recently, had a bust-up with his ex."

"Oh, pity," said Henry. "If you come across him, can you give him my name and number, please?"

"Oh I'll do that if I come across him," said Dermot. "Anyway, it's been nice talking to you, but I'm taking my wife to a party this evening. She doesn't like it if we're late, so if you'll excuse me, I'll have to go."

"Cheerio. I'll speak to you soon," Henry said to him, unaware that Dermot was really trying to avoid any further questions.

Henry thought to himself for a moment and wondered whether Dermot was telling the whole picture. He then remembered about the main job-in-hand, however, and felt it best to concentrate on preparing vehicles to send to Frank in California. He had considered preparing over twenty, in

case Frank came back asking for more, so when he made the cargo arrangements the next day, he booked 24 cars to be carried to the US. This time, he managed to sort a cargo flight to Sacramento, so they wouldn't have far to travel after the vehicles were delivered.

Another thing which Henry thought about, was whether he should replicate another vehicle transporting lorry. He had considered this previously, but thought it not fully justified at the time. This time, however, he wondered whether this may become a regular thing, transporting vehicles to Heathrow. Henry also had thoughts of expanding his business at some point, which would require a similar transporter, particularly if he was going to sell vehicles elsewhere in the UK. He was going to have to make arrangements with other car scrap yards too, and probably, to pick up more vehicles, as well. Perhaps this was the right time to replicate another vehicle transporter.

Over the next week, while Lucas helped Zebrina with the replicator and to prepare the vehicles for California, Henry took Ramondo with him to look at other possible scrap yards in which to deal with. They each agreed that despite the recession, they couldn't just rely on the three scrap yards with whom they currently dealt with. They agreed that perhaps it may be more prudent dealing with at least one scrap yard further south towards London, so as they could replicate vehicles a lot nearer Heathrow, should more vehicles be required for sale in the US.

Indeed, they agreed on a new contract with one scrap yard near Biggleswade, just off the main A1, north of London. But they could see that success brought problems of its own, particularly the probable increased staffing required. With Robinson, and now Frickas, gone to help Gaspar and Gonchaves in Tenerife, they were down to bare staffing back in Yorkshire. Madaly and Zebina were used with better effect, but they each agreed that it may soon be necessary to take on local people. And they couldn't be allowed to hear about, or witness, the replicator, and how Henry's vehicles were being produced.

As anticipated, upon the sale of the final vehicles in California, Frank had requested an increased supply of vehicles to be sold. It was at the end of the following week, that everything was in place, 24 vehicles stationed at Heathrow ready to be transported across the Atlantic. Ramondo agreed to stay back in Yorkshire, to take charge of the business in Skipton, while Henry and Lucas flew to Sacramento, with the plans of their factory. Richard Copeland had become good friends with Lucas, Ramondo,

Zebrina and Madaly, and was someone they all trusted. He was appointed as the salesman at the car showroom in Skipton. He had been out of work at the time, anyway, and this seemed a good place & occupation to develop a new career. With the business steadily increasing, he seemed the ideal person to join Henry's team.

It was Friday afternoon in Yorkshire, but it was still morning in Sacramento, when Henry, Lucas and their cargo arrived at the airport. Henry called Frank to let him know they had arrived, and while he waited in the airport Arrivals, Lucas went to the cargo bay to direct the dispatching of the vehicles, and help take them to the cargo bay.

Frank, who had bought a house in Sacramento (even though he hadn't sold his other house in Colorado Springs) didn't take long to get to the airport. As he entered the airport, he called Henry, who informed Frank where he was, before he went over to meet him.

"Hi Henry, how are you doing?" Frank said to him as they shook hands. "Where are your young engineers?"

"Oh, Ramondo had to stay back in the end," Henry replied. "I haven't enough staff back home, especially now I've had to send a couple more to Tenerife, to help with the solar paneling."

"Sounds like that's coming along fine," said Frank.

"It couldn't be better," Henry told him. "We're not exactly inundated with orders, but it seems as though every time one contract is completed, another hotel or two come along with another order for solar panels."

"I've never been to Tenerife myself, but I understand there are plenty of hotels over there," said Frank. "It looks like your boys will have a fair few more orders to come."

"Probably," said Henry. "They had requested to purchase accommodation, but I'm not too sure, what with the current recession."

"Why? Where are they currently staying?" asked Frank.

"Much of the time they're staying at Arthur's," admitted Henry, "though they sometimes find a room or two vacant at the hotels."

"Where's your other lad?" Frank queried.

"Oh you mean Lucas," said Henry. "He's gone to see the unloading of the cargo for the moment. I can give him a call."

"Why don't we go over to Starbucks, there are a few things I'd like to discuss over a coffee," suggested Frank. "Lucas is welcome to come and join us."

Frank and Henry then went to the coffee bar. As Frank went to buy two

coffees, Henry rang Lucas, to see what was happening at the time. Lucas told him that the vehicles wouldn't be unloaded for another couple of hours, as there was other cargo to be dispatched. He said he'd speak to one of the men there, before coming to the coffee bar.

A few minutes later, Frank came over with the drinks, and a couple of cookies.

"Did you get to speak to Lucas?" Frank asked.

"Yes thanks," said Henry. "It appears that we're going to have to wait a few hours before the vehicles are ready."

"That should be okay," Frank replied. "I've arranged for three 8-car transporters to come to the airport this afternoon. It shouldn't take too long to load them and to take them to the showroom to be unloaded. How many vehicles did you bring along?"

"Twenty-four, as you requested," Henry told him.

"Good, good," muttered Frank. "Do you have the plans of your factory? I'd like to take a look at them, to plan the next stage in the construction of our plant."

"How is the construction coming along?" asked Henry.

"The shell of the plant is almost complete," Frank told him. "The interior design plans have been put together, so we're just waiting to see the machinery and fittings before we go ahead with the next stage."

Henry then showed some plans to Frank.

"A little small, aren't they?" commented Frank.

"We don't have very large premises, unfortunately," Henry confessed.

"We're only a small company at the moment, and we don't produce many vehicles. Orders are steady, though, and I do have plans to expand at some point."

"Seems like you may have to expand your solar paneling venture first," Frank commented.

"Probably," Henry admitted. "When the recession is over, I'm sure the vehicles trade will grow somewhat. After all, if it's steady at a time of recession, it should only go one way when things pick up."

Frank then asked Henry some points about the machinery, at which point Henry received a call from Lucas to say he was on his way. When Lucas arrived, he explained everything to Frank, while Henry went to purchase a coffee and cookie for Lucas.

"Hhmmm," Frank muttered. "You don't have a lot of machinery, do you?"

"You must understand," Lucas said to Frank. "This is a new venture for all of us. We didn't have a lot to start from initially."

"I know, I know," said Frank, as he thought to himself.

"You don't think this is a bit too late to start planning for the shop-floors and all that goes with it?" Lucas then asked.

"Not really," Frank replied. "The shell of the plant is almost complete, but the plumbing, lighting and heating still needs to be completed. We can't start preparing for machinery while the other rooms are incomplete."

Just then Henry came back from the bar.

"Have you made arrangements for the purchase of steel, necessary for the production of your vehicles?" he asked Frank.

"Yes thanks," he replied. "We've signed an agreement with a metals supplier near San Francisco."

"When do you intend to start production at the new plant?" asked Lucas.

"Hopefully it should be ready sometime in the new tax year," said Frank.

"We've signed the agreement to take effect from April, though the plant may not be ready then."

"Have you any idea when the plant will be ready?" asked Lucas.

"Probably by June," replied Frank. "Admittedly, things have been delayed in recent months, but if we start to receive metal supplies from April, by the time the new plant is up and running, we should have a large enough stock to commence production immediately."

"Can we go and see the new plant sometime?" he asked Frank.

"We can go this afternoon, if you like," Frank suggested. "By the time we've had something to eat, the vehicles may be loaded, so we can all go there together."

"Is the plant near here?" Lucas asked.

"About twelve miles away," Frank told him. "It shouldn't take long to get there. Hopefully, we can go there before the afternoon rush hour."

"There's no rush," Henry said to him. "We're due to stay here a few days."

"Whereabouts are you staying?" Frank asked him.

"At the Marriott Hotel," Henry replied.

"You mean that one over there," queried Frank, as he pointed towards a large hotel that could be seen in the distance.

"Probably," said Henry. "I can't say for certain, but I know it's near the airport."

"You can stay at mine," suggested Frank. "There's only me and a mate of mine there at the moment."

"Thanks for the offer, but we've already booked to stay at the Marriott," Henry replied.

"Well you can come over tonight for a few hours, if you like," said Frank.

"That'll be fine," said Henry.

The three of them continued to discuss plans, before they went to the cargo bay, to see how the unloading of the vehicles was coming along. They were informed unfortunately, that there had been a delay. Henry asked Frank if he could take them to the plant, but as Frank looked at his watch, he offered to take Henry and Lucas for a meal.

They ate at a restaurant at the airport, and by 2 o'clock, went back to the cargo bay to check on the vehicles. They could see that they were now being unloaded, so Frank contacted the motor freight company and instructed for the vehicle transporters to be sent to the airport.

They didn't wait too long at the entrance to the airport, where Frank directed the transporters to the cargo bay. Henry and Lucas each had fobs for the vehicles, and, one by one, they drove them onto the transporters. By 2.45 they were all ready, and Frank directed the three transporters to the plant. Henry and Lucas went with him.

Frank received a couple of calls on his mobile while they were going to the plant, but decided not to answer them. When they arrived at the plant, Frank instructed the transporters to park in the yard outside, as to get into the plant would involve a lot of maneuvering. He then checked his watch again, and called his manager, Steve.

"Did you ring me ten minutes ago?" he asked, to which Steve acknowledged. "We're here now, so can you come to the gates and help Henry and Lucas unload the vehicles."

"I'm on my way," Steve replied.

"I'm afraid I'm in a hurry right now," Frank then said to Henry and Lucas as he turned towards them. "The other call was probably from Jeanette."

"I didn't think you had far to go, and that you had a house near Sacramento," Henry queried.

"I'm going back to my home in Colorado Springs for the weekend," Frank told him. "I haven't yet sold that house. My wife Jeanette is staying there overseeing any prospective buyers, and I'm visiting her at weekends."

"Does it take long to get there by plane?" Henry asked.

"Not really," said Frank. "I have to check-in at Sacramento airport, and check-out again at the other end, though."

"Colorado Springs is east of here, isn't it?" Lucas queried. "Is it on the same timescale as Sacramento."

"Fortunately, yes," said Frank. "I should really check-in with some time to spare, but I know I'll be okay as long as I do this half-hour before my flight."

"When is your flight due to leave?" asked Henry.

"Four fifteen," Frank told him. "I should be okay to check-in an hour before flight. If you'll excuse me now, Steve will help you with the vehicles, and any queries you may have."

Frank could see a car coming down the yard, and waved as he recognised it, as the car approached. When it arrived, he introduced Steve to Henry and Lucas, before he waved goodbye to them and drove off.

The three of them drove the vehicles off the transporters, and when the transporters had left, they each drove the vehicles to the showroom, which was at the front of the plant and just off the main road. Steve unlocked the showroom, and drove some of the vehicles inside. Some of the vehicles were left outside on the forecourt, while the rest were stored near the plant, behind the showroom. When everything was in place, Henry asked if they could have a brief look at the plant.

"Can we have a look on Monday instead?" Lucas asked.

"Probably," replied Steve. "Are you feeling okay?"

"It's probably just the jet-lag getting to me," explained Lucas. "Could you give us a lift to the Marriott?"

"Certainly," said Steve. "It's no trouble. If you pop inside my car, I'll be with you in a minute."

Henry noticed that Steve was walking with a bit of a limp, which reminded him of a man by the same name, which Frank had told him about on an earlier occasion.

"How's your leg?" Frank asked Steve when he opened the car door after locking the showroom.

"Oh, it's okay," insisted Steve. "I had an accident, a while ago."

"Oh, what was that, if you don't mind me asking?" queried Henry, to which Steve seemed a little unsure what to say. "Frank told me about a chap who had been blown up in a terrorist attack in Houston last year."

"Oh, he's told you about me," Steve muttered to Henry.

"I can drive the car if you'd prefer," Henry suggested to Steve. "It's no trouble. You'll have to direct me though."

"It's no bother. I don't suppose you've heard what Frank refers to you as?" said Steve before stopping at the gates to the plant, and getting out to lock them.

Henry thought to himself with great curiosity, before Steve came back into the car.

"Frank reckons you're the next British Entrepreneur," Steve told him. "He

says you've got your fingers in a few different pies, so to speak."

"I find that rather flattering," chuckled Henry, while Lucas was drifting off to sleep. "If only it were true."

"You have a motor business, don't you," queried Steve. "That must be making you plenty of money."

"Not enough, I'm afraid," Henry sighed.

"That's understandable, what with the current global recession," said Steve. "Frank told me you also have a business in the Canary Islands?"

"Now that is an unexpected success story," admitted Henry. "I began setting up solar paneling in my premises, after which, when my good friend Arthur found out, he requested if the paneling could be fitted to his house in Tenerife."

"I hear you've had more orders since," queried Steve.

"Not only have I had to keep two of my men on the island, but I've had to send some more men out there to help them," explained Henry. "I can see I'm going to have to set up premises and offices in Tenerife before long."

"You mean you haven't already?" asked Steve.

"I didn't expect this to take off in quite that way," admitted Henry. "I'm still a bit wary, in case orders dry up and the recession gets worse."

"You mentioned a friend by the name of Arthur?" Steve queried. "Is that Arthur...."

"Professor Arthur Wagstaff, you mean," queried Henry.

"That's the guy I was trying to think of," said Steve. "Frank's told me a few things about him, too."

"Nothing bad, I hope," queried Henry.

"That may depend on your way of thinking," said Steve. "I've heard that the guy's from outer space!"

"Where did you hear that?" asked a most-surprised Henry.

"It wasn't really Frank who said that," Steve admitted. "It was actually a friend of ours, Clint, who came to see me last year. Do you know if Arthur really is from outer space?"

"I very much doubt it," said Henry. "Then again, I'm not an expert on outer space."

"Clint told me that Arthur was from that asteroid which orbited Earth a couple of years ago," Steve explained. "I do know that that asteroid behaved very, very strangely."

"And Clint reckoned that the asteroid was actually a space ship of some sort?" Henry asked Steve in a sarcastic way, fully aware of the true situation.

"Pretty much," said Steve.

"What did Frank say about that?" asked Henry curiously.

"He didn't seem to say much at first," admitted Steve. "He then began to back-up what Clint had been saying, which I found suspicious."

"They were probably playing a joke on you," Henry suggested.

"That asteroid acted very strangely, though, and I can't get that idea out of my mind," said Steve.

"I'd forget it if I were you," suggested Henry. "They were probably just teasing you."

"I guess you're right," said Steve.

"You were telling me about your leg injury," Henry then said to Steve, trying to change the subject of conversation.

"I'm pretty much okay now," Steve replied. "To be honest, I wasn't as badly injured as you may have expected. I was about twenty-five metres away from my car when I pressed my fob to open the door. My right leg was okay, though my left leg was damaged."

"Well I'm pleased to see you've recovered from such an event," Henry replied. "Frank told me you worked for NASA at the time, is that right?"

"Yeah, I did," said Steve. "I really wanted to get back to work as soon as I had recovered, but when I went there, it didn't seem the same."

"Did you miss Frank?" Henry asked.

"Yes and no," replied Steve. "Frank retired from NASA before my 'accident'. The new guy wasn't the same though, and someone else had by that time been appointed into my old post. I still had friends there, but it seemed like I was just doing some job I'd done eight years ago. It seemed like I was going backward."

"So you decided to make a break for it?" asked Henry.

"Not at first," said Steve. "This other guy, Clint, came to visit me last year. He told me all about Frank, and took me to see him. Frank seemed pretty relieved to see me, and offered me a job in his new business venture. I wasn't sure at first, but then NASA announced I was to be made redundant."

"What are you doing, or what will you be doing, if you don't mind me asking?" queried Henry.

"I'm what you'd call a Business Analyst," Steve replied. "Basically, I'm analysing vehicle sales, assessing the popularity of solar-powered vehicles, in an effort to establish the company's sales prospects."

"How interesting," said Henry. "Perhaps you can give me an idea of how sales of my motors have been doing?"

"Your vehicles have been selling well, from what I've heard, particularly when bearing in mind the current financial climate," Steve told him. "I hope this business does as well. I've also been assessing potential sales and customers."

"In what way?" asked Henry.

"I've borrowed one of your vehicles, and taken it to dozens of shopping centres, all over California," Steve explained. "I've asked people if they'd like to own a car that didn't rely on gasoline, and operated on natural resources."

"And what sort of response did you receive?" asked Henry.

"Pretty favourable responses, on the whole," said Steve. "I would say that the current recession hasn't yet hit California, or certainly not as badly as other parts of the world."

"That's good to hear," commented Henry. "So you think sales of the new vehicles should do okay?"

"I think so," replied Steve. "People certainly seemed to appreciate the solar vehicles, and what they could do. I got the impression that Americans care more about the environment and global warming than some would make you believe. With a new president in the White House, I'm sure this company's heading in the right direction."

"That's encouraging," said Henry. "Do you think people will have the cash to buy these vehicles?"

"I'm pretty sure there are some people out there who have the resources and will want to purchase one of our vehicles," Steve told him. "Especially when the advertisements go on TV and the internet."

"You already have advertising in place?" Henry queried.

"Oh yeah," said Steve, "We just used one of your vehicles, played around on the net to amend the images slightly, to get the exact vehicles we will be selling. It's amazing what can be done on the net these days. And we have just the right person to promote the vehicles."

"Who's that?" asked Henry.

"The Governor of California," Steve informed him. "The other benefit is that as these vehicles operate on natural energy, people will be able to save plenty of money on gasoline."

"It sounds like you have everything worked out," said Henry.

"I'm sure there may be some things we've overlooked, but I can't think of them just yet," said Steve.

"You will maintain spare parts for the vehicles, particularly solar energy batteries and auxiliary batteries?" queried Henry.

"I'm pretty sure we have made those reservations, but I'll check them out with Frank next week," Steve said thoughtfully.

"So while you've been all over the state, promoting solar-powered vehicles, what exactly has Frank been up to?" asked Henry.

"Oh he's been all over the state as well, attending negotiations with future suppliers, and purchasers, too," Steve replied.

"You mean to say that you've already made deals for the purchase of your vehicles?" queried an astounded Henry.

"We have indeed," said an excited Steve. "California State Authority have agreed to purchase several solar vehicles to replace older, gas-reliant ones."

"California State Authority, as chaired by the Governor of California?" queried Henry.

"Got it in one!" laughed Steve.

"I'm beginning to see the fruits of buying shares in the new company," Henry muttered, rubbing his hands in pre-excitement.

"I managed to buy some shares in the company myself," Steve then mentioned.

"Oh, I thought they had all been sold," said Henry.

"I didn't have a lot to purchase the shares with, so I only have a few," Steve told him. "I managed to get Frank to sell them to me. I decided to make use of my redundancy payment, though it was no way as much as Frank's retirement package."

Henry then looked at his watch and asked how far from the hotel they were. He also had a few other things on his mind.

"We'll be there soon," said Steve. "About another ten minutes."

"The jet lag seems to be getting to me now, so you don't mind if I close my eyes for a little while?" Henry asked.

"No, you go ahead," Steve said to him. "I'll let you know when we're at the Marriott."

It was five minutes later when Steve nudged Henry to let him know they had arrived at the hotel. Henry then woke up Lucas, and they each thanked Steve for the lift and shook his hand, before he drove away. Henry and Lucas went up to their rooms for an hour or so, before they each went to dine downstairs. They had a couple of drinks after supper, before going back upstairs to watch a DVD, before they each went to sleep.

The following day, Henry asked Lucas what he had thought about the

business in Tenerife, and whether it would be prudent to set up premises over there. Lucas agreed with the idea, so after Henry had thought about it a little more, he decided to give Arthur a call.

"Do you know how much business we have outstanding with the solar paneling in Tenerife?" he asked him.

"I'm not too sure really," replied Arthur. "I know they have at least half-a-dozen hotels still to sort out, and I'm pretty sure they've received a few more requests since. Precisely how much, I couldn't say for certain."

"Do you think it would be worth setting up premises and an office in Tenerife?" Henry then asked him.

"Why certainly," agreed Arthur.

"The thing is, with the current recession, I'm reluctant to pay for too much just yet," Henry admitted.

"The work is continuing to come in," said Arthur. "Even if it slows down a little, they can still advertise our services. Plus don't forget, Tenerife is only one island in a group of seven."

"Hhhmmm, I suppose so," Henry muttered.

"Surely, you wouldn't have to buy new premises?" queried Arthur. "They could replicate new premises themselves."

"Are you sure about that?" asked Henry. "I don't want them to have to step-in in case things aren't done properly."

"Don't worry," Arthur told him. "You underestimate Gaspar and Gonchaves. They both know all they need about gas & electricity, and are pretty good with plumbing, too. They've had plenty of experience fitting solar panels."

"Do they know how to use the replicator?" asked Henry.

"Of course they do," exclaimed Arthur. "They've been replicating solar panels and energy boxes, for goodness sake."

"I thought you did all that?" queried Henry.

"Originally," Arthur told him. "I showed them each what to do with the replicator, and they seemed fine with it. I don't have the time to work for the European Space Agency and help Gaspar & Gonchaves as well."

Henry thought to himself for a moment or two.

"Gaspar & Gonchaves are fine and know exactly what they're doing," Arthur told him. "I mean, they must be, otherwise they would have come back from the hotels by now. The paneling on my house, and the observatory are first class. We've not had a problem."

"Well, if you're sure..." Henry muttered to Arthur.

"You're worrying too much," Arthur insisted. "If you ask me, you'd be

better off keeping them happy and on your side. They've been talking about setting-up a business on their own."

"Shall I send plans of an office and warehouse?" Henry queried.

"I shouldn't think that would be necessary," said Arthur. "Just send confirmation that they can set up premises, and I'll make sure everything is ship shape."

"How are you keeping, by the way?" Henry then asked him.

"Oh I'm fine, thanks," replied Arthur. "As a matter of fact, I'm going out tonight."

"With anyone in particular?" asked Henry.

"No-one special, really," said Arthur.

"Well whoever you're going with, just remember not to tell them where you come from," said Henry.

"I won't," said Arthur.

"Well if you do get a little tipsy, tell whoever you're going with, that you're from the UK, and spent some time in Sudan," instructed Henry. "Got that??"

"Got it in one," replied Arthur, who looked up at the clock. "Oh, is that the time, I haven't had my shower yet. I'll give you a ring in a couple of days time, to let you know how things are getting along."

Henry closed the call after saying goodbye to Arthur, before he went back to see Lucas. He told him about his decision, to which Lucas agreed. They then had a brief walk about town, before they went for lunch.

They then wandered around in the afternoon, when Henry noticed a park ahead. He then saw a sign in the street to a golf club nearby, which was where they spent much of the afternoon. By the time they completed the course, it was time for tea, so they took a taxi back to the hotel.

Arthur, meanwhile, was going for a meal with the others. They were all friendly with people from Tenerife, particularly Gonchaves, who was better known by his adopted-Christian name, Rico. Though he was past his prime, Rico Gonchaves was tall, slim and one for the ladies.

While they were eating, Arthur told the others to lift up a glass of Sangria.

"Whatever for?" asked Robinson.

"Do we have something to celebrate?" asked Gaspar.

"Yes, indeed we have," Arthur replied. "Henry has agreed that you can have a new office and premises on the island."

To that, they all cheered.

"I think it's only right," commented Rico. "We've been here 3 months now,

and the work doesn't seem to be drying up. Not even in the current recession."

"I think hotels are beginning to realise that they're likely to save on energy bills with the solar paneling," said Arthur. "So do you have any plans for your new premises? I know you said something of the sort last week."

"We've been looking at a few sites," said Gaspar. "There's one I'm rather interested in, three miles from Santa Cruz and a mile from the motorway."

"Wouldn't it be rather busy there?" queried Arthur.

"Not where we're referring to," Gaspar told him. "It's a large derelict waste site, off a small road, off another main road. No-one would ever go there."

"Do any of you have any other sites in mind?" Arthur asked the others.

"There's one site a few miles outside Puerto de la Cruz," said Frickas.

"He only likes that site 'cos it's near Loro Parque," commented Gaspar.

"And you know how much Rico likes that place, too."

"Loro Parque is a smashing place," Frickas told the others. "The zoo's marvelous, and there's plenty more to see and do."

"Well, why don't we all take a look at the sites tomorrow," Arthur suggested. "We can take a look around the island – who knows, we may see a few more places to set up premises."

They all drank to that, and had an enjoyable time out that night. Much of the time was spent discussing how large the premises should be, and Arthur suggested they could build a couple of houses there too.

The next day, they drove all over Tenerife, and visited several sites. In the end, it was decided to develop on the site near the island's capital, Santa Cruz. However, it would be a large job, even with replicators. Arthur wasn't too sure about it, either, but decided to support his colleagues, none the same, partly because they agreed to put a house on the premises, and so could relieve the crowding in his own house.

During the next week, they spent what little time they had available preparing plans for the site. Arthur arranged to take the following week as leave, so he could help out. He went to the site on the Monday evening, at about 7pm, as the sun was going down on Tenerife, along with Gonchaves.

"Where do we begin, Rico?" Arthur queried, to which Gonchaves took out the plans and showed them to Arthur.

"What I propose first of all, is to level-out the whole area," said Rico. "You take one side, and I'll take the other."

“But whereabouts do you draw the area,” asked Arthur. “There’s nothing here but weeds, cacti, and a few dry stream beds.”

Rico looked at the plan, and measured his way across the dry, barren soil, until he had found the edge of the area.

“If you start from this point, level the soil all the way back to those rocks, and then across towards me,” Rico instructed. “I’ll measure the length the other way, and do the same from my side.”

“And we can meet in the middle?” queried Arthur.

“Precisely,” replied Rico. “When we’ve sorted the full area out, and leveled it, we can then sort out the foundations for the wall.”

As Arthur and Rico leveled the soil, they diverted the spoil towards the rocky outcrop at the back of the site, after which they replicated the surface with tar. They then went back to the car, where they had a drink and a bite to eat, while the tar cooled. This didn’t take long, as it was now dark and there were no clouds in the sky to maintain the earlier heat of the day. Arthur and Rico then went to create the foundations for the surrounding wall, before leaving after midnight.

They came back again at the same time the following evening.

“What are we doing tonight?” Arthur asked.

“That ledge of rocks at the back of this site,” Rico said to him. “We intend to construct the offices in there.”

“What? Within the rocks?” queried Arthur.

“Yes,” replied Rico. “It will be no different to the Interstellar Pilgrim – a whole spaceship constructed within an enormous rock.”

“I suppose so,” Arthur said thinking to himself. “So, where do you want me to start?”

Rico walked over to a spot about ten metres from where the wall would be.

“Can you create a door here,” said Rico. “When you’ve got the basic shape of the door, you can then hollow into the rock for another twelve metres. When you’ve done that, you should hollow the area to your left for another ten metres.”

“Where will you be?” Arthur asked.

“I’ll be about another ten metres away, hollowing out the whole area to your right,” Rico pointed out. “Can you send all the spoil into a pile in the yard. We can then use this to construct the warehouse tomorrow.”

By the time they had hollowed out the area of the office, which would be at the back of the warehouse, they decided to call it a day.

“I’ve been thinking,” Arthur said to Rico on their way home. “Why don’t we

construct the surrounding walls to the premises tomorrow night?"

"Don't you think it would more appropriate to construct the warehouse first?" said Rico.

"I'd prefer to construct the outlying walls and gates first of all," replied Arthur. "It would make the premises seem more secure, don't you think?"

Rico thought to himself as Arthur drove the car.

"I suppose it would make sense," admitted Rico. "I don't think anyone would come and sabotage the warehouse, however, even if it wasn't surrounded by walls and gates."

"I take your point, but shall we do the walls first?" insisted Arthur.

"Okay," said Rico.

The following evening, Gaspar went along, too, as there was heavy work to be carried out. They decided to use the spoil to construct the surrounding walls. After a break, they constructed a pair of heavy gates, and when they finished it, they attached a strong lock in the gates, and duly locked the premises before going home.

On Thursday evening, Arthur and Gaspar hollowed out an upper floor to the office, and with the spoil, constructed the warehouse on Friday night. During the weekend, they took Robinson and Frickas to the site. They would continue the work the following week, so Rico showed them the plan and gave instructions of what was left.

Though the new premises were now taking shape, there was still a lot to be done. First of all, they hollowed out another large area within the rocks, which was to be the first floor of a house. The spoil was used on Tuesday night to construct the walls and doorways. On Wednesday they hollowed out an upper floor to the house, and similarly, used the spoil to construct the bedrooms, bathroom and lavatory the following night. There was still some spoil left in the yard, which was used to construct stairways in the house and in the office, plus a reception and lavatory in the warehouse.

Then, the following weekend, by which time everyone thought the whole project was going smoothly, along came an unexpected visitor.

"Henry!" Arthur said with surprise as he opened the front door to his house. "What brings you here?"

"Oh, I thought it was about time I came to see you," Henry confessed. "We haven't seen each other for some time, and I thought I could do with a little of your advice."

"Oh, well, you know me, glad to help anytime," mumbled Arthur. "How

long do you intend on staying, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Oh not too long, really," said Henry.

"Well, the problem is that there isn't a lot of spare room in my house at the moment," Arthur told him.

"I thought the lads were going to build a house with their new premises?" Henry queried.

"Yes, they have," said Arthur. "Unfortunately, they've had a few more orders than anticipated and couldn't take much time away. I even took time off work to help them myself."

"Well perhaps I can help them," suggested Henry. "Anyway, aren't you going to let me in?"

"Oh, sorry," apologised Arthur, as he moved to one side. "You can go through to the front room. Gaspar and Frickas are in there."

"Would you mind if I have something to drink first?" asked Henry.

"No not at all," replied Arthur. "What would you like?"

"I'll have a cup of tea, please, if you have any," said Henry, as he walked to the front room. A couple of minutes later, though, he went to see Arthur in the kitchen.

"You don't mind doing the others something similar to drink?" he asked Arthur.

"I suppose not," Arthur tutted to himself. "Tell me Henry, you only came here to find out about the business, didn't you?"

"Well, that was one of the things I wanted to discuss," admitted Henry.

"Really, I should have come here earlier, but I've had so much on recently. I even went to California a couple of weeks ago."

"Yes, you were telling me," Arthur replied. "It sounds like business is booming over there."

"I wouldn't get that carried away, just yet," said Henry. "Lucas and I took delivery of twenty-four vehicles there, and we visited the new car manufacturing plant."

"Is it ready yet?" asked Arthur.

"Not yet," Henry told him. "It just needs the lighting, heating and plumbing to be sorted, and then they can install the machinery."

"So when do they think it will be ready?" asked Arthur.

"June, probably," said Arthur. "Steve told me they had hoped it would be finished by April."

"Steve? You mean the chap who had one leg blown away in a terrorist attack?" queried Arthur.

"Evidently, yes," said Henry. "Apparently, his leg wasn't blown off

completely. One of his legs was damaged, and he still walks with a bit of a limp, but other than that, he's okay."

"How interesting," said Arthur. "Isn't it amazing what doctors can do these days? Anyway, didn't you say you wanted to find out a little more about the business over here?"

Henry simply nodded his head, hearing footsteps outside the kitchen.

"You can ask Gaspar and Frickas about the business," Arthur emphasised

"Well, I didn't really want to ask them," mumbled Henry discreetly.

"You want me to do the dirty work for you, is that it?" queried Arthur. "You may as well ask them, as I'm only going to get my information from the same sources. They should be in a better position to help you about that than I can."

Henry went quiet for a few seconds.

"Look, why don't we both have a meeting with Rico when he comes back tonight?" Arthur suggested.

"Where is Rico, by the way?" asked Henry.

"He's gone out for the day with a lady friend," Arthur told him.

"A lady friend, eh?" said Henry. "I hope he doesn't tell her about where we came from."

"Oh no, Rico wouldn't do anything like that," said Arthur.

"I hope not," Henry moaned. "We've already had one member of the 'Pilgrim blab about that, haven't we?"

"Yes, but that was just due to a misunderstanding," replied Arthur.

"Besides, I thought that was all sorted now?"

"Well apparently, it isn't," Henry told him. "Steve told me when I was in California that he'd heard you was from outer space."

"Steve? The chap with the bad leg?" queried Arthur.

"He said he'd heard it from some friend of his, Clint," said Henry. "He was the bloke who was away when we went to meet Frank in Colorado, wasn't he?"

"Yes, I think he was away at the time," acknowledged Arthur. "In actual fact, I think he'd gone to Texas at the time."

"Probably to see Steve," said Henry.

"Hhmmm," muttered Arthur. "I didn't think Clint was the sort of chap who'd tell someone about that. I did tell him, as well as Frank and Dermot, not to tell anyone else about me."

"Well it just goes to show that you can't trust anyone," Henry told him.

"Surely, Steve would have queried this with Frank?" suggested Arthur.

"From what he told me, he did," said Henry. "Apparently, Frank didn't say

much about the matter, so I told Steve it was probably some sort of joke, and to forget about it.”

“Okay, okay, I take your point,” said Arthur, as he handed a cup of tea to Henry. “I don’t think I’ll ever be allowed to forget that.”

“No, no, probably not,” replied Henry. “As long as it serves as a reminder to all the rest of us not to tell anyone our true identities.”

It wasn’t until almost 6pm that Rico arrived home. He seemed a little smug, that he had a successful date with a local lady. As he walked into the lounge, he recognised Henry, and greeted him, saying he was pleased to see him. Arthur asked the others if they wanted to go out for a meal that night, upon which Rico said he was a bit tired and didn’t fancy the idea. The others weren’t fussed, so it was decided to eat-in. Arthur ordered six pizzas, which after they had eaten, they drank with a bottle of the local Sangria.

When they began to disperse from the table, Henry asked Rico if he could have a look at the books for the business, and that he wanted to see the orders.

Rico then suggested discreetly to Henry to go with him, as he went to get his laptop. Arthur duly followed them.

Henry was impressed when he saw the figures. Evidently, there had been more money coming in than had been anticipated. Rico half-expected Henry to ask where all the money had gone, as he knew not all of it had been paid back to Henry’s holding company. Instead, Henry said he was pleased with the figures, to which Arthur added that he felt Rico and the lads were worth the extra profits, which they had saved in their business.

Henry was in fact, being coy about the matter. He wanted to see the whole picture for himself, before commenting. Instead, he asked to see the site where the premises were being constructed. Though Arthur and Rico weren’t too keen on going to the site on a Saturday evening, they agreed to take Henry along.

When they got there, they showed Henry around the premises, or rather, what had been completed. When he was shown the house, built into the rock, he asked to get the replicator.

“I’m afraid we didn’t bring a replicator with us,” admitted Arthur.

“No worries,” said Henry. “I put one in the boot earlier. You wouldn’t mind fetching it over, would you?”

“Erhh, no, not at all,” said Arthur.

While Arthur had gone to collect the replicator, Henry asked Rico about his date earlier that day.

"She's a nice lady," Rico told him. "A local girl, though not too young."

"Well, what you get up to is no concern of mine," replied Henry. "What I am concerned about, however, is to maintain our security. I do not want you to mention in any shape or form that we're from outer space."

"But I thought, strictly speaking, that we're from this planet, anyway," queried Rico. "You told us that our original ancestors are from Earth."

"That is correct," said Henry. "However, under absolutely no circumstances, should you, or any of the others, mention that we came from the Interstellar Pilgrim. If she asks, tell her you're from mainland Spain, somewhere."

"Like Madrid or Barcelona?" Rico queried.

"I don't care where in Spain, preferably from some small town in the country," Henry instructed. "Better still, ask her where she's from first – you can then tell her you're from somewhere at the other end of the country. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, perfectly," said Rico. "I wouldn't want to risk our identity, anyway. I'll make sure I convey the message to the others."

Henry and Rico could see Arthur coming, so ended their brief discussion then and there. When Arthur returned, he handed the replicator to Rico.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Arthur said to Henry quietly, as Rico led them to the house in the rocks. "Do you intend doing-up the place tonight?"

Henry grinned.

"Why ever not?" he asked. "If we can finish the lighting, plumbing, fixtures and fittings tonight, we can have a good night's sleep here. Christen the premises, so to speak."

Arthur was a little dumbfounded, so decided not to say anything. When Rico came back with the replicator, Henry told him of his intentions, which he accepted. Henry even used the replicator to create another replicator, so they could get through the work quicker. Arthur rang the others to tell them what they were doing, and that they probably wouldn't be back until the next day. They took a couple of breaks, and by midnight, the house within the new premises was almost completed. Only the heating remained outstanding, which wasn't really a problem on an island that was warm all year round.

The three of them slept well that morning, and didn't return to Arthur's house until midday. Henry was keen to finish the site completely, but the others wanted to rest on Sunday. Besides, some of them had already made other arrangements.

Instead, Henry went to finish the work over the next few days. Gaspar and Rico agreed to release Robinson to help him. Everything was ready by Wednesday, and that evening, Henry took the others to see the site. At the front was a large heavy double-gate, with the name 'Gaspar & Gonchaves'. The warehouse had an upper level and a reception room in one corner.

"All we need now is the stock to occupy the warehouse," Gaspar commented.

"I thought I should leave that to you, as I haven't dealt with your customer requirements," replied Henry.

"That's fine," said Rico. "We'll sort that out ourselves. I don't know when we'll have time to do so, mind you."

"You don't have anything on at the weekend, do you?" Arthur asked.

"I like to relax at the weekend," said Rico.

"Me too," added Gaspar. "I haven't got any engagements at the weekend, so I suppose I could get some of the panels, convectors, and odds & ends prepared."

Henry then led them to the back of the warehouse, where carefully hidden from view, was a two-floor office, which included a meeting room with desks and seats. A door was placed at one end, which linked it to the house, discreetly built into the rocks at the back of the site, and out of the way of anyone else.

"Will any of you be staying in the house this evening?" Henry asked the others.

"Probably not tonight," said Gaspar. "We'll get our clothes and belongings sorted first, so perhaps we could move in tomorrow. We can set up solar paneling heaters in this place next weekend."

The others agreed, so Henry spent the night in the house himself.

The following day, Henry arranged to visit the local government offices, along with Arthur, in Santa Cruz. This was to ensure that the premises had 'received' planning permission, were authorized, and fully recognised by the council.

Henry was due to leave on Friday. Though he was used to the wind and rain, he would later end up somewhere that made the Yorkshire climate look tame.

I'll Take The Low Road

After trips to California and Tenerife, Henry could be forgiven for thinking it

was summer. He was now back in his office at Skipton, however, and one day, while he was on his PC, he noticed a pop-up indicating he had just received an email. He didn't think much about it at first.

Early that afternoon, after he had returned from the local café with his lunch, he opened his outlook express to check the mail he had received. There were the usual advertisements, which he quickly deleted, plus a few messages from Frank and Arthur. Then, he noticed one from the Western Isles council, off the far north western coast of Scotland. The message read:

From: Andrew MacDougall

Date 26 February 2009 10:51

To Henry Retono

Subject Development For Natural Energy

Dear Henry,

I note your proposal to develop energy from natural resources, and find this of interest. I believe this is achievable for the Western Isles, if not for the United Kingdom in general, and would like to discuss your proposal at some point.

I am available next Wednesday afternoon, March 4th 2009, and invite you to visit our offices at Sandwick Road, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, HS1 2BW. It may be possible to fly to Stornoway Airport from Glasgow or Edinburgh, or alternatively, you may sail to Stornoway via Ullapool. This however, may take some time. If you cannot travel to Stornoway, please let me know. It may be possible to meet on the mainland, at Inverness perhaps.

If you have any queries, please let me know. You can contact me on 01851 703773, extension 3749, if you have any urgent queries please let me know,

Yours sincerely,

Andrew MacDougall
Planning Manager, Western Isles Council

Henry was excited. Someone had at last responded positively to his suggestion of using wave power to develop energy in the UK. He eagerly went onto the web, to see how much information he could find about the Western Isles. He checked the flights from Glasgow airport, and found there were three or four flights depending on the day, which took little more than an hour. It may involve spending a night at Glasgow airport or somewhere nearby, but this didn't seem a problem, so he replied shortly afterwards to say he would attend.

Henry went to the library in town that afternoon, before he went home to Ribblehead Cottage. He picked up a book on the Western Isles, after which he checked for Stornoway on the UK atlas. It was here that he began to rethink how he would get there. There seemed to be few roads, and even fewer villages on route. When he looked closer, he noticed the area was surrounded by mountains, at which point he thought that may make a nice journey in itself. He decided to speak with Ramondo about this.

"What do you think is the best way to get to Stornoway?" he asked.

"Stornoway, on the Isle of Lewis?" Ramondo queried. "That's to the west of the very north of Scotland. What on earth do you want to go there for?"

"You know that idea I mentioned," Henry said to him. "The one about utilising wave power from the sea? Well, I've been invited to Stornoway to discuss the proposals."

"Congratulations," Ramondo said to him. "I should think there must be strong waves and currents around there. That would be an excellent place to harness the power of the sea. Haven't you checked the options of travel to get there, online?"

"I can fly there from various airports in Scotland," replied Henry.

"That shouldn't be a problem, should it?" queried Ramondo.

"Oh no, that's fine," said Henry. "The thing is, I've been thinking of driving up there, through the Highlands of Scotland. I'd love to pass that way."

"I know there's a bridge across to Skye from the mainland, but I didn't think there was anything similar to get to Stornoway," said Ramondo.

"There isn't," Henry told him. "I'd have to drive to Ullapool, where I can catch a boat. There are two sailings to Stornoway each day."

“I think I’d sooner fly there, myself,” Ramondo commented. “It’d be shorter, and safer, I’d have thought.”

“I know, I know, but I’ve had two long flights recently, to Tenerife and California,” said Henry. “I don’t fancy checking-in, and waiting hours at an airport again.”

“Well it’s your decision,” Ramondo replied. “I wouldn’t mind traveling through the Scottish Highlands myself sometime, but for business purposes, I know which option I’d rather take.”

Henry thought about what Ramondo said, and that perhaps flying would be the better option. Over the next few days however, he began to let his heart rule his head once again. Henry had considered traveling across the highlands on various roads, even though no route was suggested on the internet. On reflection, though, he decided to stop off at Inverness, and by midweek, had booked a hotel there, for Tuesday evening the following week.

Now, all that was left was to decide which route to take – the A9, over the high Drumochter pass and via Aviemore, or the lower, and seemingly more scenic A82, via Glen Coe and Glen More. In the end, it was no contest.

Henry decided to make an early start on Tuesday morning, before the rush hour jams queued up at Ingleton. As it happened, Henry made good time along the motorways to Glasgow, and stopped off for breakfast in one of the service stations en route. Even north of Glasgow, everything seemed okay at first. From Loch Lomond, the dual carriageway ended and the A82 became smaller the further north he drove. To compound matters, the road was quiet and there were few signs to confirm the location. Henry began to wonder whether he was on the right road. He didn’t worry too much though, as he viewed the grand beauty around him, and, soon enough passed a sign confirming he was driving along his intended route.

As Henry continued, he was enchanted by the views of the mountains on his left and the wild recess of Rannoch Moor to his right. This recess then grew into mountains, and the road seemed to close-in as he entered Glen Coe. This felt a little eerie, particularly as he passed near the site of a massacre over three hundred years ago. Henry was getting restless, and still hadn’t had lunch.

It wasn’t until after 2 o’clock that he entered the town of Fort William, where he stopped to eat. He also rang Ramondo back at Skipton, and

told him all was well. Henry spoke to a few people in Fort William, and after he had finished his lunch, he felt recharged and ready to make his way on the last leg of the journey to Inverness. As he left the town, the road became quiet once again, and as he looked out of his window, he could see Britain's highest mountain, Ben Nevis, to his right. As he wandered along, he could see why the district was known as the Highlands. By the time he reached Glen More, otherwise known as the Great Glen, he noticed a sign for Loch Ness further ahead. When he arrived there, Henry stopped beside the banks of the loch a few times in anticipation, but never managed to see the infamous monster.

It wasn't until almost 5.30 that Henry arrived on the outskirts of Inverness, after which he went into an inn, for a drink and a bite to eat. He examined his map of the district, to ascertain how to get to his hotel, too. It wasn't until about 7' that he booked into it, and watched a DVD in his room, before having an early night. All the driving had taken its toll on Henry. He wanted to get an early start the next morning, too.

In hindsight, Henry felt it was a good decision to leave early the next morning, as the weather forecast for the day ahead was rough. It was only just getting light as he left the hotel and headed for the A9, the main dual carriageway out of the city. It was rather cloudy to say the least, and windy too, even when he turned inland and onto the road that should take him to Ullapool.

As Henry drove onwards, however, he noticed the fog increasing. The fog seemed to get thicker and thicker the further westward he went, until at one point he decided to stop altogether. He couldn't see any car lights behind him or ahead, not that he could see very far at all. Henry looked at his map, trying to guess where precisely he was. To his left, he could just see a steep grass slope, but was unable to tell what was on his right, so decided to get out of the car. As he walked across the road, he noticed the ground dropping, and what seemed a loch a little further down.

Henry remembered passing a sign for Loch Garve, but was unsure how much further he'd since driven. Reluctant to go any further forward, Henry pulled over to the side of the road, and sat in his car, listening to a CD, in the hope that the fog would lift. Instead, it seemed to get thicker. Not one vehicle went past him, on either side, so he could ask for help from no-one. Henry considered going on regardless, but realised that if he proceeded slowly, as was necessary in the current situation, he wouldn't get to Ullapool until after the boat was due to sail for Stornoway. That was if the conditions were good enough for the boat to set sail at all.

Henry considered contacting Andrew MacDougall, whom he was due to meet, and canceling the appointment, but he knew that wouldn't help his ambition at all. He then remembered that there was an airport at Inverness, and that there were flights from there to Stornoway, at which point he decided to turn back. Henry got out his car again, and could see there was little room to manoeuvre, so reversed slowly for over a mile, until he noticed a gap to his left. It seemed like the entrance to a farm road, so he reversed here before heading back for Inverness. Fortunately, as he proceeded, the fog lifted, though the wind became fiercer.

It wasn't until after 9.30 when he arrived at Inverness Airport. Though the fog had lifted, Henry got soaked as the rain lashed down, while finding the pay-box and booking his car for a 24-hour stay. He ran for the entrance to the airport, and went straight to the radiator to dry himself, before ringing home.

"Good Morning, Major Motors, how can I help?" was the reply on the line.

"Hi Zebrina, it's Henry here," he told her. "How is everything back home?"

"Oh, fine, fine," she replied. "How are you?"

"Drenched, basically," said Henry. "Could I speak to Ramondo or Lucas please, if they're available?"

"I'm afraid they've gone out on a job, and left me to hold the fort," she told him. "Is there anything you'd like me to tell them?"

"No, no, not really," he replied. "You can let them know I'm safe – I'll probably give them a call later. I haven't had much to eat this morning, so I'm off to find a fast food store here. If they have one! Cheerio."

First of all though, Henry walked over to the departure screen, where he noticed a flight that had been due to leave for Stornoway at 9.25 hadn't yet left. Perhaps the delay was due to the weather. He also noticed another flight due for Stornoway just after midday. This gave him plenty of time to buy a ticket for the flight and check in. He then walked a little further, and around the next corner, was a small restaurant, where he had breakfast. He then called Andrew MacDougall to let him know he'd be at Stornoway by about 1 pm.

By midday, the fog had cleared from the Highlands, as Henry's flight took off from Inverness. The plane touched down at Stornoway at 12.45. Henry called Andrew as he entered the Arrivals area at Stornoway airport. It was too small to be classified as a lounge in itself.

In fact, Henry noticed the airport was even smaller than the one at Inverness. He had thought Leeds/Bradford airport was small, but it seemed massive compared to what he'd seen that morning. Henry didn't

have to wait long before Andrew MacDougall arrived.

"Hello, Mr Retono, I presume?" a voice said as Henry turned around.

"And you must be Andrew MacDougall," Henry replied, as he stood up to shake his hand. "You can call me Henry, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you Henry," Andrew said to him. "Did you get here alright?"

"Yes thanks," Henry replied. "The weather was pretty rough earlier this morning, but it improved by lunchtime, I'm pleased to say."

"Have you been waiting here long?" asked Andrew.

"No, not really," Henry replied, as he was about to divulge where he'd come from, but decided not to, in case it would attract more questions.

"Have you had anything for lunch yet?" Andrew asked.

"I had a late breakfast, but I'm a little thirsty," Henry told him. "I wouldn't mind a snack and something to drink, if that's okay by you?"

"I was hoping you might say that," replied Andrew. "There's a nice pub in town, where they have beautiful Stornoway fish meals. You'd love the local cuisine. How long will you be staying, by the way?"

"I was intending to return on the 6.20 flight, though I could stay overnight," said Henry. "My car is booked for a 24 hour stay, so I can get the 9.00 flight tomorrow morning."

"You should be okay for tonight then," Andrew replied, as he led Henry to his car in the airport car park. "I just wanted to discuss your proposals first of all, to get a better idea of the expense, and how much we may save if we went ahead with the proposals."

"I can't be sure as to how much you'd save, without first being aware of the current expenses," said Henry.

"Perhaps I should have explained, we sub-contract both gas and electricity for the Western Isles," Andrew informed him. "Therefore, the final bills may be a little higher than those on the mainland."

"So presumably, you have to account for maintenance and operating costs of sub stations?" Henry queried.

"That is correct," said Andrew. "I'll show you our books when we get to my office. I may take you around the island, too, if we have enough time."

"Are there any particular sites of interest for my proposal?" asked Henry.

"There are, but I can't really say too much more at present, as these are merely proposals at this stage," replied Andrew, as he unlocked his car door.

Andrew then drove Henry the short distance to The Hebridean Man, the local inn he had referred to. While Andrew went to the bar to purchase

drinks and order the meals, Henry took out the information papers, which he had taken to give to Andrew. After lunch, he presented it to him. Andrew looked at it carefully.

"Have you made some amendments to your proposal?" he asked Henry.

"I have made a few slight amendments, though I'd refer to them more as updates," Henry replied. "You'll notice that the turbine is hanging over the sea, from two arms locked into the cliffs behind."

"And every wave that crashes into the turbine is creating energy?" Andrew queried.

"Precisely," said Henry. "Within the turbine is a battery, which absorbs the energy. The energy is then transmitted to the main sub-station via connections within the arms."

"There are cliffs on the island facing the Atlantic currents, suitable for the turbine, but there may be a slight problem," Andrew told him.

"What would that be?" asked Henry.

"The main sub station is inland," Andrew explained. "We would need to lengthen the connections."

"The connections may need to be fitted beneath ground, but it shouldn't need to be too long," advised Henry. "This island is not much more than a few miles at it's longest point, is it?"

"We could build a new sub station nearby," said Andrew. "Mind you, that may face problems of it's own."

"Oh, what problems might they be?" asked Henry.

"Well, with strong gales we often receive from the Atlantic, the sub station would take a battering if it were sighted near the coast," explained Andrew.

"If a new sub station was built near the coast, perhaps it could be built at a lower level, below ground," Henry suggested. "It shouldn't take up much room, should it?"

"No, not really, I suppose," muttered Andrew. "I think the other option may be better, as most of the accommodation on the island is in Stornoway, facing the UK rather than the Atlantic. I'll have a careful think about it."

"I think you'll find this isn't the only project of it's kind," Henry then stated.

"Oh?" queried Andrew. "Is there something like this elsewhere in the UK?"

"Not in the UK," Henry told him. "There is a similar scheme on the west coast of Ireland."

"Oh, do you know whereabouts?" asked Andrew curiously.

"I'm not sure of the precise location, but it's somewhere off the coast of County Kerry," informed Henry. "Planning permission was granted by the

local council, though I'm not sure of it's name."

"Have you looked on the web?" asked Andrew.

"Yes, the name of the council is in Gaelic, and I can't recall precisely how it's spelt," Henry told him, quickly realizing that though this was meant as a bluff, he had probably stumbled on the reason why he couldn't trace the council in question.

"I'll tell you what," said Andrew. "I'll have a look on my PC when we go back to my office. I should be able to trace the council. After all, my council has a Gaelic name."

"Is there much difference between Scotch and Irish Gaelic?" Henry asked.

"There are differences, but it's nothing I wouldn't be able to overcome," Andrew told him. "Why don't we go back to my office, to see what we can find on the internet?"

Andrew went to pay for their lunch before leading Henry to his office. There, after a little searching, Andrew traced a list of Irish councils in Gaelic, and after checking their locations, found one based at Tralee, by the coast of County Kerry. There, after reading the home page and moving across to the Developments sub page, they found the project Henry had referred to. Henry felt vindicated, as Andrew read the page aloud.

"Do you think you can get planning permission here for my project?" Henry asked.

"I'm not going to make any final decisions at this moment in time," Andrew replied. "I'd like to contact the council in Tralee to find out a bit more about the Irish project, first of all."

"You are still in favour of the scheme?" Henry queried.

"I am keen on the project, but I first want to get some advice on the costs of the project," said Andrew.

"I may be able to help you there," Henry told him. "I may be able to get hold of the material and resources for the project."

"Do you have any idea how much this will cost?" asked Andrew.

"Not at the moment," replied Henry. "I'll have to speak with my Engineers first of all. I'll confirm the details as soon as I can."

"I'll tell you what," said Andrew. "I'll take you along the western road of the island. We can then see if there are any locations suitable for such a project, eh. By the time we've finished, I can take you back to Stornoway Airport."

"On consideration, I think it may be better for me to stay in town for the night," suggested Henry. "By the time I arrive back on the mainland, I'll

probably book another hotel overnight, rather than drive home in the dark.”
“Okay then,” said Andrew. “I’ll contact the council in Tralee, see if I can get hold of the scheme administrator.”

Andrew contacted the telephone no. on the home web page for the council, and after speaking to a lady in reception, was put through to his equivalent manager.

“Hello there, how can I help?” the manager asked at the other end of the line.

“I noticed details on your web site of a scheme to harness the power of the Atlantic currents,” said Andrew.

“That will be project Atlantic, I believe,” replied the manager. “Can I first ask whom I’m talking to, before I divulge any further information?”

“My name is Andrew MacDougall, Planning Manager for the Western Isles council off the north west of Scotland,” Andrew told him. “I’m looking into a similar project for our islands and would be grateful if you could give me a little information on your scheme.”

“Well, planning permission may be granted over this coming month, so I’m not aware of any fixed dates to carry out the construction of the turbine,” the manager replied. “The best people to speak to would be Shamrock Power, as it’s their project.”

“My main concern at this moment is the cost of such a project,” said Andrew. “At this time, we don’t have a great deal of money to spend, but would obviously like to save on any future expense.”

“Well, I believe the project would be around 10 million Euros,” said the manager. “I can’t be certain, as costs of projects are often increased along the way due to unforeseen overheads, so please don’t quote me on that.”

“That’s okay for now,” said Andrew. “At least I have an idea of the costs. Do you know how this is likely to be paid for?”

“As I understand it, this is likely to be paid on the average current bills of residents who will be affected by the project,” the manager informed him.

“Three quarterly payments from residents should account for the total expense. Once again though, please don’t quote me on that.”

“Do you know who I can speak to at Shamrock Energy?” asked Andrew.

“Shamrock Power, you mean?” queried the manager.

“Yes, sorry about that, I meant Shamrock Power,” said Andrew. “

“I believe Brendan O’Hagan will be the best person to help you,” said the manager. “You can find his telephone number on our web site. Is there any more I can help you with?”

“Probably not at this moment,” replied Andrew. “Thanks for all your help. I’ll get onto Brendan O’Hagan right away.”

“Did you say Brendan O’Hagan?” Henry then asked Andrew as he came off the phone.

“Yes – do you know him?” Andrew queried.

“No, the name sounds familiar though,” admitted Henry. “Anyway, what do you think about the project after talking to your Irish counterpart?”

“Did you hear our conversation?” Andrew asked Henry, to which he acknowledged. “Well, the estimated cost of the project is 10 million Euros, about the same in sterling at the moment. That’s too much for a small council like ours.”

“The project needn’t be that excessive,” Henry insisted. “The turbine and other material involved in Ireland are probably larger than would be needed here.”

“Even if the costs are half the amount, it’s still too much for the Western Isles,” said Andrew

“I may be able to sort out the materials & resources for the project,” Henry suggested.

“Do you know how much it will come to?” asked Andrew.

“No, not at present, but I should be able to reduce the costs substantially,” Henry insisted.

“Hhmmm, I don’t know,” Andrew mumbled. “Perhaps we could speak to Scottish Energy about this. We could run the project in partnership.”

“I don’t really trust energy companies,” commented Henry. “From my point of view, they’re only in the business to make money. They increase the cost of energy due to oil prices, and yet they still have plenty of coal-fired power stations on the mainland, and plenty of coal to utilise.”

“I know, I know,” said Andrew. “I know coal isn’t the greenest form of energy, but the energy companies will never try to cut costs. Not unless they have to.”

“And the government aren’t doing much to help, either,” added Henry. “I think the time has come to take matters into our own hands.”

“I suppose we could submit plans to the Scottish parliament, and ask for an increase in funds,” considered Andrew. “They may be of more help.”

“You are still keen on the project?” Henry then queried.

“Ochi,” said Andrew. “Actually, thinking about it, there is another option.”

“Oh, what’s that?” asked Henry.

“You could take over the energy contract for the island,” suggested Andrew. “The current one will run out later this year.”

"It will take some time before we get our money back for the construction and implementation," emphasised Henry. "Not to forget the administration, either."

Andrew then looked at the energy costs for the previous year, 2008/08, which were over £2million.

"You could recover the costs in a couple of years. After that, all the money made on the island's energy will be at a profit," he insisted.

Henry still wasn't too keen on the idea, however.

"Perhaps we could throw something into the cost," Andrew then suggested. "That will help lighten the expense. And you will be able to sell your idea."

Henry was coming round to the suggestion.

"I'll tell you what, then," Henry said to Andrew. "I'll assess the costs from my point of view, and leave the rest to you for the time being."

The two of them agreed to the suggestion, and after a brief chat and a cup of tea, Henry said farewell for the time being. He then went to book himself a room at a nearby hotel for the evening, before asking a local taxi driver to take him around the island to get a good idea of the Atlantic coast, before going back to the hotel.

Henry woke up early the next morning, in preparation for his return flight to Inverness. He booked into the local airport by 8' and arrived back on the mainland at 9.35. By the time he returned to his car, it had overstayed the 24 hours he had paid for by a few minutes, but as there was no ticket on the car windscreen, he decided to leave.

This time, Henry took the A9, much of which was dualled. He stopped on the journey, and rang home to confirm he was okay. He stopped a couple more times on his way home, and didn't arrive back at Ribblehead Cottage until 4.45. He made himself a cup of tea, and not long after finishing it, he fell asleep.

Ramondo and Zebrina arrived home before 6pm, and found Henry laying on the sofa. They tried to wake him up, but without success. Then, at almost 7 in the evening, Henry opened his eyes.

"Well hello there," Ramondo said to him. "How did things go these last few days?"

"Oh, not too bad," Henry struggled to say, as he yawned at the top of his voice.

"Did you manage to sell the idea of the sea turbine?" asked Zebrina.

"Yes and no," Henry told her. "The chap at Stornoway, Andrew, seemed

keen on the idea.”

“So, what was the problem?” asked Ramondo.

“Money, as per usual,” said Henry. “He managed to trace that scheme in Ireland, and spoke to somebody over there. Unfortunately, the estimate for the project was too much for Stornoway.”

“They seemed to be able to pay for the scheme in Ireland,” commented Ramondo.

“That’s because their scheme covers a much larger number of people,” explained Henry. “Stornoway is the main town in the Western Isles of Scotland. There can’t be many more than five thousand people on the isle of Lewis.”

“Oh,” muttered Ramondo. “Can’t we do the job at a much smaller cost?”

“Yes, in practice,” said Henry. “Other things have to be taken into consideration, though.”

“Such as?” asked Zebrina.

“The Western Isles are about fifty miles from the mainland,” said Henry. “If we were to take on the project, we’d have to set up the materials and resources on the island itself.”

“Couldn’t we produce them here and take them by lorry to wherever the local ferry operates from?” queried Ramondo.

“Possibly,” said Henry. “I wouldn’t fancy taking such big and heavy items for such a long distance, to Ullapool I mean. We don’t even know if the local ferry could take the cargo, either. And even if it could, it would probably mean more than one journey.”

“What, for the ferry or for taking the items to the local port?” asked Ramondo.

“Both, probably,” replied Henry.

“So, what’s going to happen now?” asked Zebrina.

“I’ll have a think about it over the next few days,” said Henry. “In the meantime, Andrew on Stornoway is going to see if he can get a grant from the Scottish parliament. It shouldn’t be too difficult to get a few million quid for such an environmentally-friendly scheme.”

“Even in this current climate?” asked Ramondo. “Didn’t you say he suggested we could take on the lease for the energy supply on the island?”

“He did - that’s another option we may want to consider,” said Henry. “For now, though, we’ll see what he says about the grant.”

Over the next few days, Henry examined the costs of scheme to his business. Though it wouldn’t cost anything to replicate the necessary

materials & resources, there would be costs for hiring of contractors and supervision of work. Then there were the costs for transportation of cargo, as the work would be carried out on an island 50 miles west of the mainland, in the Atlantic. On the plus side, at least the island was ideal for replicating the materials and resources, bare, empty and where a few bits of missing rock wouldn't be recognised, unlike in the south-east of England.

Later that week, Lucas reminded Henry that he had made an agreement with a car scrap yard west of London.

"I thought we were going to utilise that scrap yard more often," Lucas queried.

"That was mainly for any future purchases of Major Motor vehicles, from California," said Henry. "The yard wasn't too far from Heathrow, so we wouldn't have far to transport any future orders."

"Don't you think we could make better use of the contract?" Lucas asked. "Otherwise we'd be paying for something we never used."

"We're not really in a good position to exploit the contract at the moment, though," said Henry. "After all, four of my men are in Tenerife on a separate job."

"Madaly and I could go there one day," suggested Lucas.

"What? To pick up scrap cars and take them back up to Skipton?" Henry queried. "It hardly seems worth it, particularly if we ever needed to take the new vehicles back to Heathrow sometime later."

"Don't you think we could exploit the situation down there though?" asked Lucas.

"Come again?" Henry said at first, before thinking about what Lucas had said.

"We aren't selling that many vehicles here any longer," said Lucas. "Don't you think there may be more potential developing a similar showroom down south?"

"Hhmmm, I'm beginning to see where you're coming from," Henry said to him.

"Even if the south east has been hit harder by the recession than up here, because it's such a built-up area, there are millions of people who may want to buy a car like ours'," Lucas told him.

"True," admitted Henry. "Where would we replicate the vehicles, though? There can't be anywhere east of Reading where such an activity wouldn't be noticed. It's so congested down there."

“Why don’t you let me and Ramondo go there and find out?” said Lucas. “There must be some nook or cranny totally out of people’s view.”

“I’ll need one of you here, at least,” Henry told him.

“Well, perhaps I could go there with Madaly?” suggested Lucas. “She knows how to use the replicator.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Henry. “I’ll have a word with the others, and we can then discuss it together.”

Henry considered Lucas’ suggestion, and sought advice from Ramondo, Arthur, Rico and Gaspar, each of whom favoured the idea. Henry began to see the light in the idea, but lost some of the enthusiasm when Gaspar said he wasn’t too sure whether this was the right time to expand. Henry thought about the idea again, and decided to ask Professor Frank Marshall for his views.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Frank told him. “I’m not really akin to the UK, particularly at a time of recession, but I do know that the south east is the most heavily-populated part of the country. There should be good potential to sell something as environmentally-friendly as your motors.”

“I know, I know, but I’m not too sure how viable this is in the current financial climate,” said Henry.

“I thought the south east was the wealthiest part of the UK,” said Frank. “Even in a recession, there must be plenty of potential out there.”

“True, true,” muttered Henry. “I would have been keen on the idea normally, but I’ve just expanded the resources for my team on Tenerife.”

“I see why you may be a little apprehensive about this idea,” Frank acknowledged. “Did that set you back a great deal?”

“No, not too much, I suppose,” replied Henry, remembering that everything on Tenerife had been created using the replicators, and didn’t cost a penny.

“Well, perhaps this may be the best time to develop your business in the south east,” Frank suggested. “People may be more keen on a less-expensive-to-run vehicle at a time of recession.”

“I take your point,” said Henry, who was becoming more enthusiastic about the idea again.

“Actually, I wanted to ring you anyway,” Frank then told him.

“Oh, have the cars I took last month already been sold?” queried Henry.

“Not as such,” said Frank. “However, I would like to request a few more vehicles, with some slight moderations.”

“Is there a problem with the current crop?” Henry asked.

"No, not at all," replied Frank. "I was wondering whether you could produce CAC vehicles?"

"CAC vehicles?" asked Henry. "What type of vehicles are they?"

"Oh, I should have explained," Frank apologised. "CAC is the new name for our company, Californian Automobile Company. We hope to open the plant in late May, but the state Governor has already completed a set of adverts for our company."

"So you want me to produce new vehicles with the CAC design and logo?" Henry queried.

"That's it," said Frank. "Do you think you could do that? I'll make it worth your while."

"If you can send the design and logo to my email site, I don't think it would be too much of a problem," replied Henry.

"Good, good," said Frank. "Would it be possible to send us about 50 by next month?"

"I think so, but I won't confirm it just yet," said Henry. "I'll speak to my Engineers, and in the meantime, if you can send me the necessary data, I'll come back to you as soon as I can."

Henry recognised that the contract with the scrap yard near Heathrow would come in very handy, so after speaking to Frank, he discussed the matter with Lucas and Ramondo.

"Do you think we could produce 50 cars over the next few weeks?" he asked them.

"Probably," Ramondo replied before Henry turned to Lucas.

"It should be possible, though it may depend on how many scrap vehicles we can get from the yard at Slough," said Lucas.

"If there is any delay at the scrap yard in question, we can arrange to produce some vehicles from here in Skipton," said Henry. "I've hired a warehouse, also near Heathrow, in which we can store the vehicles."

"Which vehicles are you referring to - the new vehicles or the scrap ones?" queried Ramondo.

"Both, effectively," said Henry. "I doubt there's anywhere in that part of the country where we can replicate scrap cars into new ones, so we'll have to carry out the work in the warehouse itself."

"That may be okay for a while, but if people eventually gather that scrap vehicles are going into the warehouse, and new ones are coming out, don't you think it may draw suspicion?" Ramondo queried.

"Not if we're discreet about it," Henry told him. "Besides, the cars which will be produced there are destined for California, so I doubt anyone will

be able to trace the new vehicles.”

“Did you say these vehicles will be of a different design?” asked Lucas.

“Yes,” replied Henry. “These will be slightly verified, with the CAC logo on them. Frank will send me the design, which we can load onto the replicators in order to produce the CAC vehicles. I have a feeling he may request more at a later date.”

“I’m still not too sure about the security of producing these vehicles,” commented Ramondo. “Couldn’t we set up a warehouse of our own, like the one you did in Tenerife?”

“The environment isn’t ideal for this,” explained Henry. “It isn’t like the wilds of Yorkshire down south. There are no out-of-the-way side valleys or abandoned quarries, in which to carry out the work.”

“Henry’s right,” said Lucas. “There are few dead-ends, and those that there may be, are attached to tiny country roads which we couldn’t get a vehicle transporter along.”

“I guess you’re right,” Ramondo sighed.

“Now, Lucas, I’m offering you first option to go down there, as you suggested to develop our business in the south east,” said Henry.

“But that was more to produce and sell our own Major Motors vehicles,” Lucas replied.

“We can do that later,” Henry instructed. “First of all, we need to produce these vehicles for California. When these are complete, we can then think about developing our business in south east England.”

“That’s if we don’t receive any more requests from Frank,” said Ramondo.

“To be honest, at this moment in time, if we can get work to bring in the revenue, I don’t really care what we’re producing,” commented Henry. “If it brings in more money by producing vehicles for Frank, then so be it.”

“I still say that if we do too much replicating, someone may see us and get suspicious,” said Ramondo.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” insisted Henry. “Who knows, we may be able to build a factory in the vicinity, one day.”

“A proper factory, or one like this place in Skipton?” asked Lucas.

“A big, manufacturing plant, like the one in California,” said Henry. “One day we’re going to have to construct things without replicators. There will come a point when we will have to utilise local people. From what Rico’s been telling me, they may soon have to take on new staff on Tenerife.”

Henry looked for Frank’s message on his messages, but it still hadn’t arrived by the time he and Ramondo left. Instead, he found the message, and it’s contents, on his home site, and after checking it over, asked

Ramondo to download the data into two replicators, one of which would be kept at Skipton.

The following day, Henry went to the Heathrow warehouse, which was located in an industrial park, just off the M25. Lucas, who drove the vehicle transporter, and Madaly, went along too. They also took Henry's Green Machine, which was carried on the back of the transporter

When they arrived at the warehouse, Henry rang the scrap yard, which was located not far away, on the outskirts of Slough. After lunch, Henry unloaded the Green Machine, before sending Lucas to the scrap yard to collect six cars. In the meantime, he and Madaly closed the warehouse, and inside, replicated an upper leisure room and a bedroom beside it, similar to the ones set up on Tenerife. There was already a kitchen downstairs next to reception, plus a toilet nearby.

Lucas didn't bring the scrapped cars back to the warehouse until most of the units on the industrial park had closed. Some were still open, though no-one saw him drive the transporter and its scrapped cars into the warehouse.

The next day, Madaly stayed in the reception room manning the phone, while Henry and Lucas replicated four of the scrapped cars into new CAC, solar powered vehicles. In the afternoon, Henry replicated the other two cars, while Lucas went to collect another six vehicles. Again, he didn't bring them to the warehouse until 6 pm.

The next day, Henry helped Madaly to replicate more CAC vehicles, as there hadn't been many phone calls. Lucas picked up the scrapped cars again. By this time, however, there weren't many old motors left at the Slough scrap yard.

"Did you ask if there were many other scrap yards in the area?" Henry asked Lucas.

"I was told that there's one near Staines, and one near Wraysbury," said Lucas.

"Was that all?" Henry asked with surprise. "Surely, there must be a few other scrap yards around here."

"There were others a bit further away, apparently," Lucas informed him. "I know there was one near High Wycombe and another at Camberley. I think the bloke said there were several on the outskirts of London, too."

"Good, good, I'll make some inquiries tomorrow morning," said Henry.

The next day, he visited some of the sites Lucas had mentioned, and

made arrangements for old scrap motors to be collected. By Friday, they had got into a regular pattern of replicating, so Henry could go back to Ribblehead Cottage at the weekend. He wasn't sure whether they could get all 50 vehicles into the warehouse, so asked Lucas to keep him informed of the situation. If necessary, they would have to park some of the new CAC solar motors at Heathrow, in readiness of distribution to California.

Henry then made inquiries as to whether any cargo operators would carry 50 cars in one journey. Unfortunately, though he found one, they were unavailable at the time, so Henry decided to stagger the cargo. Unfortunately again, when he asked to book a flight for the coming week, he was told none was available, so had to book a week later for 25 vehicles.

By that time, all 50 vehicles bound for California were ready, and on one Wednesday morning, they were driven the short distance to the cargo bay at Heathrow. Henry went on the flight alone, where he thought of Lucas' original suggestion to develop a showroom for Major Motors near London. When he met Steve at Sacramento airport, and asked him his opinion on the idea, Steve, like Frank, thought it would be an opportunity worth trying.

Back at Henry's Heathrow warehouse, there was now more room available to store other items. Lucas decided to travel around the area, to look for places he could set up a showroom. He noticed several suitable locations, where large shops had been vacated due to the current recession. Former Woolworth stores at Ealing and Rayners Lane seemed particularly suitable, as was the former MFI store at Greenford. He took pictures of the sites on his mobile, and saved them to show to Henry when he returned.

When Henry arrived back at Heathrow, Lucas went to meet him. Henry told Lucas that he had considered his suggestion and had come round to the idea. After lunch at a Heathrow restaurant, Lucas took Henry to view the sites. Lucas first took Henry to see the possible showroom site at Rayners Lane. Henry rather liked the site, large enough to have a few show cars inside, but not too large. It was at the end of a long row of shops, after which were detached houses. Lucas parked the Green Machine, and led Henry around the area, which seemed quite well-to-do. Neither of them knew how green the local people were. They noticed more than one car parked outside the residences. If people could afford more than one car, perhaps they'd like to be seen with a green motor?

Henry thought this would be a good place to start from.

Lucas then drove Henry to Greenford, to what was a large site, larger than their Heathrow warehouse. Henry thought this was too large for a first venture, though it may be more suitable should the business develop. After a brief debate, Lucas accepted Henry's views, before driving to the third site at Ealing.

The site here was along a busy main road – ideal to attract clients. The area was more cosmopolitan than at Rayners Lane, and the environment a little more down-market. Would it attract the right sort of clients, Henry thought to himself? Were they concerned with the environment or about their lifestyle? Would they be interested in a non-polluting, cheaper-to-run motor?

Henry and Lucas debated the remaining two options, each of which had their own merits. Ealing was nearer to Heathrow airport, and was busier, but noisier and with more traffic. Rayners Lane didn't have the same hustle and bustle, but was quite busy none the less, and seemed more up-market. In the end, it was assessed that Ealing was perhaps too busy and noisy, so they decided to go for the other site to sell Major Motors in south-east England.

First of all, though, Henry had to go to the local council to arrange a lease of the property. As it happened, however, it wasn't quite as simple as that. First of all, the property formerly belonged to a failed business, so he had to go to the respective administrators. Secondly, the owners of the property were owed payment on the original lease by the business which had collapsed. Therefore, the owners of the property had to agree a new lease before receiving payment of the lease owed by the collapsed business.

Arrangement of the former Woolworths at Rayners Lane took longer than anticipated, and was still not sorted by the time the remainder of the CAC vehicles were due for California. Henry wanted to go on the flight with these, but decided to stay back to chase up the lease. Instead, he sent Lucas to California on his own.

When Lucas arrived at Sacramento airport, he wandered around the concourse looking for Frank, before he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Hi Luke, is that you?" a voice said from behind, as Lucas turned around.

"Hi there, you must be Steve?" he queried. "I didn't recognise you at all."

"Oh no matter," Steve said to him. "Last time you came here you were sleeping off the jetlag, so you may not recall me too vividly. Where's Henry – buying duty-free items, I suppose? "

"No, he decided to stay back this time," explained Lucas. "He's sorting out a few problems with the business."

"Oh? What problems are they?" Steve asked.

"Nothing major," said Lucas. "We are in the process of expanding our business. He's sorting out a lease on a new showroom on the outskirts of London."

"Oh yeah, I remember Frank telling me something like that a little while ago," said Steve. "Mind you, I had thought it would have been sorted by now."

"So did we," replied Lucas. "Unfortunately, the property was leased by a company which went bust, so Henry's consulting a revised lease with the administrators."

"Well, at least I have some good news for you over here," Steve informed him.

"Oh, what's that?" asked Lucas.

"Your cars are selling well," said Steve. "The idea of solar energy is getting around."

"Which cars are you referring to?" asked Lucas. "The Major Motors cars we sent a few months ago, or the CAC cars from a few weeks ago."

"Both actually," Steve told him. "We've leased two new showrooms, one in San Francisco and one in San Diego, both of which have sold our CAC models. The Major motors are here in Sacramento."

Steve then looked at his watch.

"That reminds me, do you know when the vehicles are to be unloaded?" he asked Lucas.

"Not too long, as I was given to understand," Lucas told him.

"Do you mind if we go to the cargo bay?" Steve requested.

"What, now?" queried Lucas.

"I'm sending the first eight to be delivered to San Diego," said Steve.

"They need to leave here early – they've a long way to go."

"Okay then," agreed Lucas. "You don't mind if I get myself something to eat, in the meantime?"

"No, go ahead," said Steve. "I'll be waiting here for you."

While Lucas went to the confectionary store at the airport, Steve contacted the transport agency, and ordered the first of three vehicle transporters, which he had booked a few days earlier. When Lucas returned, he and Steve headed for the cargo bay.

"Have you found new salesmen, or should I say salespersons?" Lucas asked Steve on their way to the cargo bay. "Or have you sold them

online?”

“Oh we’ve taken on a few new salespersons,” said Steve. “Several dealers have been laying off staff, so we haven’t had much problem recruiting new salespersons.”

“I thought the recession never hit California?” queried Lucas.

“That’s what Frank likes us all to believe,” admitted Steve. “Some parts of California aren’t affected at all, but others have been seeing a downturn in sales, though not as badly as many other states.”

“Are you going to open a showroom in LA?” asked Lucas.

“We want to, but the leases are too expensive,” said Steve. “We’re currently in discussion with a local dealer to sell our stock, instead. It’s just persuading the damned dealer that our cars are sustainable.”

“I’d have thought a dealer would have jumped at the opportunity of a new deal, particularly at a time when the main three manufacturers in the US are in such a bad way and needing national bail-outs,” Lucas commented.

“I know, I know,” muttered Steve. “Many dealers have strong links with manufacturers and are reluctant to give us any leeway.”

“Where’s Frank today?” asked Lucas. “Has he sent you instead, while he’s waiting in his plush new office?”

“Oh no, Frank’s actually in Colorado at the moment,” explained Steve.

“He’s in the process of selling his old house. You do know he’s already bought a new house just outside Sacramento?”

“Yes, Henry told me,” said Lucas. “Do you have a house here, or are you staying with Frank for now?”

“I’m staying with him for the moment, but I’m hoping to go back to Texas sometime,” Steve told him.

“Do you miss your family?” asked Lucas.

“I always ring my wife everyday, and we exchange messages on email, but I do miss her,” admitted Steve. “Actually, I’m hoping that CAC Motors will eventually expand into other states. Frank’s promised me a place if we do.”

“Wouldn’t you all prefer to move to California than remain in Texas?” asked Lucas.

“Sure we would, but that depends on various factors,” said Steve. “We’ll see what develops over the next year, as our children are coming to the end of their education.”

“Forgive me, but don’t you think you’re being a little optimistic just now?” commented Lucas.

“I know where you’re coming from, but I’ve every confidence this business

will expand,” replied Steve. “Precisely how much and how long it will take, remains to be seen.”

“Do you think it may be a bit of a way off, just yet?” Lucas queried.

“For the time being, perhaps,” sighed Steve. “We never give up hope, though. People perceive American Man as a greedy, money-grabbing businessman, but I know that’s just not true.”

“Perhaps that’s the old vision of American Man,” Lucas suggested.

“Possibly, possibly,” said Steve. “We now have a new President, with new ideas, and who wants to help the world’s environment.”

“He certainly seems a lot better than the old President,” said Lucas.

“I’ve every confidence that the American people will purchase our CAC motors, and gas-guzzling vehicles will be a thing of the past,” added Steve. “I’ve spent enough time traveling about this state to know that, Californian’s at least, would prefer a vehicle that is less reliant on fossil fuels and is much more cost effective.”

“Aren’t you a little worried about the car manufacturers and energy companies getting together against CAC motors?” asked Lucas. “After all, they’re reliant on each other – cars depend on oil and oil companies sell much of their product for cars.”

“I think there has never been a better time for a company like ours to develop,” said Steve. “Motor manufacturers are so concerned with their state of business that they need national hand-outs. They won’t be looking out for a business like ours. Besides, we have the Governor of California behind us.”

“True, I suppose,” Lucas commented. “When will the transporters be here?” he then asked Steve as he looked at his watch.

“They shouldn’t take too long,” Steve told him. “I want to get one load of vehicles sent as soon as possible, as they’re to be delivered to our showroom at San Diego.”

“That’s a fair distance,” said Lucas. “I suppose there are flights out there?”

“There are plenty, but it wouldn’t really help, bearing in mind the time it would take to get them off one plane and onto another, and then unloaded and picked up again at the other end,” said Steve. “We think it isn’t really worth it.”

“I suppose we could send some direct to San Diego,” suggested Lucas.

“Now who’s getting ahead of themselves?” Steve laughed.

As they got to the cargo bay, they could see that three of the CAC vehicles had been unloaded. Lucas went to check them, before he pulled out the set of keys from his briefcase, and took out those for the appropriate vehicles. As a fourth vehicle was unloaded, Steve could see a transporter at the gates of the cargo bay, so went over to have a look. It was indeed the one destined for San Diego, so after the transporter was let into the bay, Steve directed it towards Lucas and the other vehicles.

After a brief discussion with Steve, the driver placed ramps onto the back of the transporter’s lower level. Lucas then proceeded to drive the vehicles onto it, one by one. More vehicles were being unloaded at the time, and the ramp adjusted and lengthened to reach the upper level of the transporter. Lucas, again, drove the vehicles onto the upper level.

Steve discussed plans for the delivery with the driver, and when everything was ready, he ushered the transporter away, on it’s long journey to San Diego. He then asked Lucas to sort out the next eight vehicles, as these would be put onto a similar transporter, which would deliver them the shorter distance to San Francisco. It was at this time when the second transporter arrived, so neither Steve or Lucas had much time to rest. When this load was all complete, and directed away by Steve, the two of them went to sit down.

“Phew! I’m starving and exhausted,” commented Lucas. “Shall we go back to the airport to have some lunch?”

“Why not,” said Steve, as he looked at his watch. “I think we deserve it, don’t you?”

“Definitely,” agreed Lucas. “Actually, before I forget, here’s something else I’d like to ask?”

“What’s that?” queried Steve.

“Would you mind if I stayed at your place tonight?” Lucas then asked.

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” Steve said to him as they walked back to the terminal building. “I know Frank won’t mind, not that he’s there at the moment. When are you flying back to the UK?”

“Oh, I’m not due to leave until tomorrow morning,” said Lucas. “Henry was going to come here, but he’s had to go to sign the lease on the new showroom, and never arranged to stay at a hotel.”

“Tell me, Henry seems a pretty knowledgeable guy?” Steve queried.

Lucas could foresee a question coming, and considered what to say.

“I’ve begun to wonder, how come we haven’t heard much about Henry until

now?" asked Steve.

"I don't really know," Lucas replied. "I just work for him. He does seem to have quite a few ideas. It often baffles me why these hadn't been developed earlier."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," said Steve as he opened the door into the airport. "Anyway, what do you fancy for lunch? We'll be able to find most things somewhere around here."

"I wouldn't mind a pizza," said Lucas. "And something cool to wash it down with."

"That suits me fine," said Steve.

Lucas was now beginning to feel the effects of jetlag, and was happy to find somewhere to sit down. Fortunately, a relaxing lunch break and a smooth drink or two helped him feel a lot better. Steve then called for the third transporter, before he and Lucas went back to the cargo bay, to sort out the last nine vehicles.

After the first 8 were put onto the transporter, Lucas drove the remaining vehicle, following the transporter to the local showroom. He then rested for a while, before Steve handed the keys of the cars to the salesperson at the showroom, and drove home with Lucas.

Meanwhile, back in London, Henry was signing the contract to the lease of the former Woolworths at Rayners Lane. When he was finally handed the keys, he went along to see the premises, and even considered starting work on it. He decided, however, to wait until Lucas arrived back. Before leaving, however, he decided to leave advertisements on the window, about new, green, cars, non reliant on fossil fuels. There was a telephone number to contact on the advert, which was the no. at the warehouse, to see how popular the cars may be.

As it turned out, there seemed to be no end of inquiries for the advertised vehicles, though it wasn't until the following Monday that Henry and Lucas went to the premises. First of all, they boarded up the windows, before they replicated the showroom overnight. They decided to open it on Saturday.

By this time they had replicated a handful of sporty Green Machines, and D1s, it's saloon equivalent. They received many inquiries, including several inquiries for the solar cars, but probably due to the British weather, they didn't really sell.

On a more positive note, however, a digital D1 was sold on the first day. It seemed green power was prevailing, particularly as they had sold 5 by

the end of the first week.

People seemed to come from all over West London to see the vehicles for themselves. Henry, however, wanted to get back to Ribblehead Cottage, and even considered hiring a car salesman to assist Lucas, but as Madaly seemed to be quite helpful, decided against it.

The Sex-Mad Doctor

Henry decided to take a long weekend break, and didn't return home until Tuesday. When he arrived home, the first thing he did was to check his emails, and noticed a lot of messages. One was from a site named `ondichi.commander@pilgrim.com`. He had a fair idea from whom and where this came from. As Henry read the message, it suggested some of the crew of the Interstellar Pilgrim were considering settling on Earth. They had surveyed the planet and suggested they'd like to visit London. With it's multi-cultural society, it seemed the ideal place to settle down. The message also queried the best place to land a reconnaissance craft near the city.

Henry replied immediately, saying it was good to hear from his former commander. He agreed with the suggestion, but informed him that there were no suitable locations near London in which to land a reconnaissance craft. If it were to be detected, this would be reported immediately and become big news. Henry suggested they could land in a pot hole, as his team had done, and that Yorkshire was probably the best place for this.

A few days later, Henry received another email from Commander Ondichi, confirming all was well on the Interstellar Pilgrim, and he had noted Henry's recent comments about visiting London. He accepted that it may be a good idea to land a reconnaissance craft in a pot hole, and asked if Henry could then pick up the Commander and some colleagues, and take them to London for a day or two.

Henry thought this may be a good idea at first, but then remembered how awkward it was to get out of pot holes, and that by the time he may have pulled the Commander and colleagues up from the surface, he may be too tired to drive all the way to London. He decided to reply again.

Hello Commander, he wrote on his reply.

It was nice to 'hear' from you again. I hope you and all the crew are well. You are always welcome to come and visit me and my team here on Earth. You may wish to stay at my residency briefly, prior to visiting

London. I may have indicated on my last message, my team has since reduced somewhat, so there will be room available at Ribblehead Cottage.

Henry then re-iterated that Arthur, Gaspar, Gonchaves, Frickas and Robinson had now settled in their own jobs on an island elsewhere, and that Lucas and Madaly had since moved to London, before continuing:.

I was unable to return the Large Reconnaissance Craft to the 'Pilgrim, as you had left Earth by the time my team and I had settled here. If you would like to visit us on Earth, would you like me to return the LRC to you, or will you come in the Small Reconnaissance Craft? If you have a mega-mobile phone, you can contact me on 07999 881881,

Yours Gratefully,

Major (Henry) Retono

Henry read the message again for any mis-spellings, before sending it. He also copied this to Arthur, as well as forwarding him the original message from their former Commander.

Henry then sorted all his messages and had a look on the internet, before he went to rest himself. He went to bed early that evening, still knackered from Saturday's escapades, but was woken up a few hours later by a familiar tune. It was from his mobile.

"Hello," he yawned into his mobile. "Who might that be, at this time of night?"

"Hello, is that you Major?" queried the man at the other end of the phone, Commander Ondichi.

"Why hi Commander, it's good to hear from you," replied Henry.

"Have I called at an inopportune time?" asked Commander Ondichi.

"As a matter of fact I'd just been sleeping," Henry explained. "You were probably fortunate to get hold of me – it just happens that I'd forgotten to switch off my mobile phone tonight."

"If I'm disturbing you, I can ring again later, Major, or should I call you Henry?" Commander Ondichi queried.

"Oh don't worry, Commander, I don't mind what you call me – I haven't heard from you for a few years now," said Henry. "So, you must have received my message."

"Yes, thanks," said the Commander. "I note that you wouldn't mind some of us coming to visit you."

"Well, I could do with some extra help," Henry acknowledged. "How are you going to get here, though?"

"Oh we've replicated a new Reconnaissance Craft," the Commander told him. "It's newer than the old one, obviously, and we've redesigned it inside."

"But how did you get to replicate it?" asked Henry.

"We sent the small reconnaissance craft to one of the asteroids nearby," the Commander told him. "We used some of the asteroid in the process. If there's anything you'd like us to bring along, just let me know."

Henry thought about sending details of the turbine, and asking if that could be replicated, but then considered that the reconnaissance craft may not be large enough to carry the turbine and all that went with it..

"I couldn't recall anyone actually using the replicator in space," admitted the Commander.

"No, I can't recall any such occurrence, either," admitted a mystified Henry. "Whose idea was it?"

"Doctor Gammazeta suggested that we could use the replicator on the asteroid," the commander told him.

"Doctor Gammazeta, eh," muttered Henry. "She's the one who succeeded Doctor Stardust, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes," confirmed Commander Ondichi. "She had been working with him for some time, so seemed the ideal person to assume his role."

"It may be a short distance to you and me, but the asteroid belt is a long, long way away in Earth terms," Henry pointed out. "That reminded me, is the new reconnaissance craft capable of travelling as far as Earth?"

"Yes, definitely," the Commander told him. "Is there anywhere you'd like us to land the craft?"

"There should be a few pot holes near me, which may be large enough," replied Henry. "Before you arrange anything though, can you send me the dimensions of the new reconnaissance craft, so I can check if any pot holes are large enough to incapsulate the craft."

"Doctor Gammazeta has done that already," said the Commander.

"Oh," said Henry. "In which pot hole do you intend to land?"

"Well, we haven't planned anything yet, but the Doctor Gammazeta has suggested a hole called Gaping Gill."

"No, Commander! Don't land there," Henry advised him. "That regularly has people abseiling down it."

"What!" asked a bewildered Commander. "Do you mean to say that Earth inhabitants actually climb down that large open slit of a waterfall?"

"Some people do, I'm afraid," said Henry. "It sounds bizarre, really. I've never tried it myself, and I don't fancy doing so. Do you know how high deep Gaping Gill is?"

"Deep enough to hide the reconnaissance craft," said Commander Ondichi. "By the way, have you had any problems with the reconnaissance craft you took to Earth?"

"No, fortunately enough," confessed Henry. "I've not even heard anything about crafts from outer space being discovered on the foothills of Ingleborough. I don't know if anyone has been down the hole, but there's one nearby which attracts it's fair share of potholers."

"Oh, what's that one called, so we know to avoid it," asked the Commander.

"Alum Pot," Henry informed him. "We actually covered the craft when we decided to settle on Earth. It may be that no-one has ever got to the bottom of the pot hole over the past couple of years."

"Can you send me a list of any suitable pot holes you know of, in which we can land a craft?" the Commander requested.

"I'll do later today, after I've had a look at the craft's dimensions," said Henry, as he looked at the electric clock in his room, which now read 00.26 am. "In the meantime, you don't mind if I go back to bed?"

"No, no, that's fine," said the Commander. "I'll speak to you tomorrow."

Later that morning, Henry informed Ramondo of the call he received in the early hours, and that he would not be joining him at Skipton that day. He relaxed in bed for an extra hour, before taking a shower and having breakfast. He went to his PC at around 10' that morning, and opened his Outlook file. A message from Commander Ondichi had been received, which he was keen to read. This contained the dimensions of the new reconnaissance craft, which was larger than the one he and his crew had travelled in.

Henry spent much of the day looking at which pot holes may be suitable for the Commander's crew to land, before forwarding his recommendations to Commander Ondichi. He also received a call from the contractors on Frank, advising him about further developments on the plant in California.

Henry decided to stay home on Tuesday, too, to prepare the final plans for the turbine, and load the images into new replicators. He also sent copies of this to Commander Ondichi.

That evening, Henry received a call on his mobile. It was the Commander,

who told him that a small team would arrive in the early hours of Saturday morning, at Meregill hole, which was also on the slopes of Ingleborough. Henry knew a cave led to the pot, but that this may attract visitors. On the other hand, if this was going to be a temporary stay, and the craft would land there at night, it may be okay. He did, however, suggest postponing it until after the weekend, in case of any potholers visiting Meregill hole.

Henry went to measure the pot hole the next day, after which he prepared a winch & pulley from which he and Ramondo could collect the crew.

Late on Sunday night, Henry and Ramondo went to Meregill hole. It wasn't easy carrying the winch & pulley up the hill to the pot hole. When they got there, they looked into the hole, from a safe distance, and shone torches to see if anyone was lurking inside. When they agreed that everything was clear, Henry contacted Commander Ondichi to confirm it was safe to launch the reconnaissance craft.

Half an hour later, just after midnight, they noticed a brilliant flash. It seemed to come from inside Meregill hole.

"Are you alright?" Henry called to the Commander on his mobile.

"Yes thanks," the Commander confirmed. "We're fine. I think we may have hit something on the way, but the craft seems to be okay. Professor Schmidt is checking that all instruments and panels are in working order. I'll get back to you as soon as it's confirmed that the craft is okay."

Ramondo shone their torch down the pot hole, and couldn't see anything burning. He and Henry waited a little while, before they received the all-clear.

"Is there sufficient room for you to get out the craft?" Henry then queried.

"There's enough room around the craft," confirmed the Commander, who went to open the door to the craft. To his surprise, something fell on his head. "Ouch!" he groaned.

"What is it Commander?" Henry asked. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Major, or should I start calling you Henry," Commander Ondichi said to him. "It was only a rough and irregular piece of wood."

"That sounds like the branch of a tree," surmised Henry. "I think you may as well call me by my name, now you're down here on Earth."

"Very well," said the Commander. "Do you know when you can get me and the crew out of here?"

"Not too long, I hope," replied Henry. "We've brought a winch and pulley along. Ramondo's preparing them now – I'll let you know when it's all ready."

Henry and Commander Ondichi continued talking until everything was

ready, at which point Henry tied himself with the harness, checked that all was safe, before Ramondo let him down the pot hole.

Progress was slow, however, and it wasn't until after 1am that Henry arrived at the bottom. He saw Commander Ondichi waiting for him, and the two of them went to hug each other, as if they hadn't seen one another for years (as was the case).

"Smart craft you have here," Henry said to the Commander.

"It's new and a little larger than your craft," the Commander told him.

"Would you mind if I took a look inside?" asked an inquisitive Henry.

"Why certainly," said Commander Ondichi. "You can meet some other members whom you haven't seen for sometime."

Henry thanked him, before the Commander led him inside the craft. It wasn't until almost 3.00am that they exited the craft, and Henry fastened the harness to the Commander, before contacting Ramondo to pull him up. The Commander then shook hands with Ramondo, before the harness was sent back down to pick up the next member of the crew.

It wasn't until almost 4.00 that Professor Schmidt finally made it up the pot hole. At that point it was agreed that there was only enough time left for one more member, Doctor of Psychology, Procyon, and Henry, to be winched up the pot hole, before the sun was due to rise. It was agreed that Doctor Gammazeta, who had come to study life forms on Earth, would remain in the craft, until Henry and Ramondo were due to return late that night, to collect her and some others.

Ramondo drove them all back to Ribblehead Cottage, where Henry introduced the Commander, Professor Schmidt, and Dr Procyon to his accommodation. They were fascinated with the cottage, and the car.

Henry took them to the Ribblehead Inn later that day. They rather liked the local liquor, and were even more fascinated with the large railway viaduct near the inn.

They spent a while chatting away merrily, before afternoon closing, after which they walked back to Ribblehead Cottage. Henry showed them the TV to see the latest news about Earth. In the end, they fell asleep back at the cottage.

When they awoke, Henry looked at the clock. It was late at night, and he had to wake up the others if they were to prepare to collect the remaining crew from Meregill hole.

"What's the rush?" asked Commander Ondichi, as Henry woke him.

"I'd like to get Doctor Gammazeta as soon as possible, before we leave for London," confessed Henry.

“Doctor Gammazeta doesn’t have to come to London with us,” the Commander suggested. “I’m sure there’s ample wildlife to study in this vicinity. Ramondo can go and collect her later today.”

Henry agreed to this, and so after he headed for London with the Commander and Professor Schmidt the next morning, Ramondo drove to Chaple Dale, and parked a mile outside the hamlet. There was an old road which led up the hill to Meregill hole. This was only suitable for 4-wheel drive vehicles though, so he had to take the winch & pulley up the hillside all by himself. When he got to the pot hole, he contacted Doctor Gammazeta, who was relieved to hear from him.

“What happened to the Commander?” she asked him.

“Oh, he’s gone on a mission with Henry, a.k.a. Major Retono,” he informed her. “Are you alright down there?”

“I’m okay,” confirmed the Doctor.

“I’ve come to collect you today,” Ramondo told her. “I’m going to drop the winch. I’ll let you know when it’s at the bottom. You’ll have to fasten the harness on yourself, and I’ll pull you up.”

“Is it raining?” Doctor Gammazeta asked.

“No, why do you ask that?” queried Ramondo.

“I had a look out of the craft earlier, and saw water pouring down the pot hole,” she replied. “I’m a bit reluctant to leave the craft, in those conditions.”

“It was just a temporary drip, probably from the beck which runs into the pot hole,” Ramondo told her. “It rained earlier this morning, but it’s fine now. Have a look on your monitor.”

When Doctor Gammazeta was satisfied with this, Ramondo lowered the winch, and a little later, confirmed when it had been fully lowered. The Doctor then opened the craft door, and found the winch lying outside. It was still dripping in the pot hole, though a lot less than it had been earlier. Ramondo persuaded her everything would be okay, and instructed her carefully how to fasten the harness. When they were both satisfied that everything was in order, he began to pull her up.

As Doctor Gammazeta was being pulled up the pot hole, she watched the sides of the walls closely. She felt a little frightened, as she had never been in a pothole before, and had never been suspended quite so high above the floor. Almost an hour later, she finally surfaced, and Ramondo pulled her towards him, before unlocking the harness.

“Oohh!” Doctor Gammazeta exclaimed, as she stood beside Ramondo, clutching his body carefully without wishing to let go.

"It's alright, it's alright," Ramondo said to her. "You're safe now."

Doctor Gammazeta stared at Ramondo, whom she knew from earlier times on the Interstellar Pilgrim. She felt his body, and put her hands around his bottom. Before he could pull her away, they fell down together, Doctor Gammazeta ending up on top of Ramondo. For a minute, they stared into each other's eyes.

Doctor Gammazeta then handed back his mobile. Ramondo explained that a cave led to the pot hole lower down, and that the water seeping down may be coming from there. She then helped him dismantle the winch & pulley, and helped to carry some items down to the car.

"Did you carry all this gear up that hill by yourself?" she asked Ramondo, to which he said yes. "Ooohhhh, you are a strong man, aren't you?"

"Well, I do what I can," he replied. "You look too young to be a Doctor. You don't mind me asking, how old are you?"

"I'm two-hundred-and-fifty-nine," Doctor Gammazeta stated.

"If any human asks you your age, just tell them you're twenty five," Ramondo suggested to her. "People don't live as long on Earth as we have done on the 'Pilgrim."

"Yes, so I understand," said Doctor Gammazeta. "Professor Schmidt was explaining the reasons behind that to me. He told me that the paradox was first put forward by a chap from Earth."

"Some Professor Einstein, apparently," said Ramondo. "He's pretty famous on Earth."

"Oh, do you think we could meet him?" she then asked.

"I doubt it," Ramondo replied. "He's dead."

"Do you realise that you shan't live as long, here on Earth?" the Doctor asked.

"I can accept that," admitted Ramondo. "To be honest, I had a few apprehensions when I first arrived here, but now I've settled into a new life, I don't want to go back to the 'Pilgrim. I much prefer life here in the fresh air, even if it means I don't live as long."

"Are you still with Zebrina?" Doctor Gammazeta asked.

Ramondo thought for a while before giving his reply.

"She was your girlfriend, wasn't she?" the Doctor queried.

"Zebrina's been my girlfriend for a long time now," Ramondo told her. "We don't see as much of each other as we used to, though."

"Oh, why is that?" asked the Doctor.

"Zebrina now lives at the Skipton warehouse-cum-factory," Ramondo told her. "I used to live there with her, but Henry wanted me as his right-hand-

man, so to speak, so I now live at Ribblehead Cottage.”

“That’s the place where Henry lives, too, isn’t it?” queried Doctor Gammazeta.

“Yes, that’s right,” Ramondo acknowledged. “I still see Zebrina at Skipton most days, though.”

“What exactly do you do there?” asked the Doctor.

“That’s where we produce cars, like my one further down the hill,” said Ramondo. “In truth, we actually pick up old cars and replicate them into new ones.”

“Is that Henry’s business?” asked the Doctor.

“That’s one part of his business,” said Ramondo. “You see that little green thing down at the bottom of the hill – that’s my car.”

“I’ve heard all about your car,” she said to him. “I’ll bet it’s comfy inside.”

“You could say that,” said Ramondo, who was now beginning to blush a little. “Lucas and Madaly produce and sell new cars, too, in another part of the business based near London.”

“Are they still together?” asked Doctor Gammazeta, to which Ramondo confirmed. “Whatever happened to Professor Wagstaff?”

“He found himself a job as an Astronomer, based in Tenerife,” explained Ramondo. “Gaspar and Gonchaves went to do some work for him once, fitting solar-panelled windows, and they developed another arm of the business there.”

“Wow! Henry sounds a bit of an entrepreneur,” said Doctor Gammazeta.

“He’s a good leader,” replied Ramondo. “A bit cautious sometimes, but generally, he knows when to avoid problems and when to take an opportunity. Did you know, that digital car was actually invented by me and Lucas.”

“Oh really,” queried Doctor Gammazeta. “Doctor Stardust, bless him, always said you were a clever lad, and that you’d go far.”

Ramondo simply smiled at her.

“Do you mind if we stop here for a rest?” Doctor Gammazeta then asked.

“My left foot is hurting. I may have a blister.”

“Perhaps you stepped on a sharp stone,” suggested Ramondo, as he stopped to down his tools.

“Possibly,” replied the Doctor. “I may also have banged my foot on the wall of the pot hole you pulled me up from. Would you mind having a look, please?”

Doctor Gammazeta sat down and took her tights off, before telling Ramondo where she was hurting, at the bottom of her foot. As Ramondo

examined it, Doctor Gammazeta lay back, and let Ramondo see up the full length of her left leg and beneath her skirt (which was bare!).

"It doesn't look too bad," Ramondo told her, as he tried to keep his eyes on the Doctor's left foot. "You're probably just worn out, particularly after spending nearly an hour hanging on a rope in Meregill hole. Why don't you let me carry the rest of the load – the car isn't too far away."

"Now you come to mention it, I am a little tired," admitted Doctor Gammazeta, still lying on the ground. "I'm a little achy all over, too. I really could do with a massage."

Once again, Ramondo was unsure precisely what to say, so just sat down on the grass beside her. Doctor Gammazeta then looked around the hill.

"It's a little barren around here," she said. "Why don't we go over there, behind those trees and bushes."

"I wouldn't recommend going anywhere near there," Ramondo told her.

"There's another pot hole camouflaged behind the foliage."

"Oh!" she said. "Never mind."

"Did anyone tell you about Henry's second car business?" Ramondo then asked her.

"The one in London, or does he have another business?" the Doctor asked.

"Well it's not exactly his business, but he has shares in a new car manufacturing business in America," he told her.

"America?" she queried. "That's another land on this planet, isn't it?"

"That's right," confirmed Ramondo. "It's one of the biggest countries on Earth, and certainly the most prosperous."

"Oh, really," she said rather curiously. "Is Henry attached at all?"

Ramondo informed her that Henry had no partners, but was wondering at what Doctor Gammazeta may be thinking about next, so just lay down and relaxed. Then he began to wonder what else may enter her mind if she saw him relaxing, so he threw the tights back to Doctor Gammazeta.

"Are you feeling better now?" he asked her.

"Oh yes, much better thank you," she replied, at which point Ramondo stood up and began to walk to the car. "I probably just need a little bit of cream rubbed over me."

"That shouldn't be a problem," said Ramondo, to which she began to smile. "We've got some soothing cream at Ribblehead Cottage. Shall we get going?"

Profesor Gammazeta's smile disappeared, and so quickly put her tights on and followed him down the hill. It wasn't long before they reached the

car. Ramondo opened the door for the Doctor to get into, before he went to put the winch & pulley back in the boot. He then went back to the car and drove back to Ribblehead.

"Hhmmm, nice premises," she said as Ramondo drove into the driveway. "It's light-years better than some of the places I was monitoring on other parts of this planet."

In what countries were those premises you were monitoring?" he asked curiously.

"Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka," she replied. "We wanted to avoid places of war."

"You needn't worry about any war here in the UK," Ramondo re-assured her. "This is one of the most developed countries on Earth."

They then got out of the car, after which Ramondo locked it and unlocked the door to Ribblehead Cottage. Ramondo then led her to the lounge and switched on the TV for Doctor Gammazeta, who was impressed. He then walked to the kitchen, next door.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked her. "I was going to make some tea, or would you prefer coffee?"

"I don't mind really," she replied. "I'm not very fussy."

"Yeah, I've got that impression of you, myself," Ramondo then commented quietly to himself.

A few minutes later, Ramondo took a tray with cups, saucers and a packet of biscuits into the lounge, which he shared with Doctor Gammazeta.

"That was nice, rather soothing, don't you think?" she said to him when she finished her cup. "That reminds me, wasn't you going to give me some soothing cream for my aching limbs?"

"Oh I'm ever so sorry, Doctor," Ramondo said to her, a little sarcastically, though she didn't recognise this. "I'll finish my cup of tea, and show you upstairs."

Ramondo led the Professor up the stairs and pointed out that behind the door at the top of the stairs was the bathroom.

"There's a bedroom to the right of this, and a study with books and a PC in the next room," he explained to her.

"What's in those two doors to the left of the bathroom?" Doctor Gammazeta asked.

"There used to be a boiler there, many years ago," said Ramondo. "It's just a storage cupboard now. The other rooms are all bedrooms, You may as well make one of them yours, while I go and fetch the soothing cream

from the bathroom.”

Ramondo spent a couple of minutes in the bathroom, before he took the soothing cream to Doctor Gammazeta. When he opened the door to her bedroom, however, he had a big surprise.

“What are you doing lying naked like that on the bed?!!” he shrieked.

“Oh, I’m aching all over,” she said to him in a poor, sympathy-seeking voice. “I’d be ever so grateful if you could rub me in. Please?”

“Alright, alright, I’ll see what I can do,” Ramondo replied, believing that he could handle the situation.

He opened the tub of soothing cream and asked Doctor Gammazeta where she would like him to start rubbing it in.

“Can you start on my feet, and work your way up from there?” she requested. “You may want to give me a massage when you’ve finished.”

Ramondo began to rub-in the soothing cream, gently along her left leg.

“How far would you like me to go?” he asked her as his hands were on her hips.

“Oh, please carry on, all the way,” she requested. “I’m beginning to feel a little better already.”

Unbeknown to Ramondo, as he rubbed the cream above her left hip and towards her pubic hair, she undid the button to his trousers, and by the time Ramondo noticed, his trousers were beginning to slip, Doctor Gammazeta noticed a bulge in his pants, prodding outwards. Before he could pull up his trousers, she went to touch the protruding object.

“Are you alright?” he asked her.

“Oh yes, I’m fine,” she said in a slow, sexy voice. “This feels good.”

Ramondo felt too embarrassed to say anything, so simply grabbed the soothing cream with his left hand, intent on rubbing this into her right foot in order to get away. Doctor Gammazeta tried to pull his pants, as his penis was becoming larger and thicker.

“What’s in here, I wonder?” she said, as she let go with one hand and pulled down his pants with the other. “Oooooohhhh.....” she then said.

“I’m really up for it, I’m really up for it now. Will you oblige me, please....please?”

Ramondo was unsure, and as he tried to resist his temptations, one hand slipped, and he fell onto Doctor Gammazeta. Ramondo could no longer control his manly urge, and obliged the Professor by thrusting his penis into her.

“Uhh!” Doctor Gammazeta began to pant. “Uhh! Uhh!”

Ramondo was now lost inside the mind of a teenager. He couldn’t stop

himself pushing, pushing, pushing ever harder. He kissed her cheeks, then her chin, her neck and body, until he kissed her bare breasts. Doctor Gammazeta continued panting, louder and louder.

“Uhh....Ramondo,....Uhh.....Ramondo.....” she then cried.

Ramondo went to kiss her cheeks again, but continued pushing into her, time and time again. He stared at the Doctor, and was about to place his lips against hers. She stared at him, too, and as she noticed his intentions, opened her mouth as they shared French kisses.

“How, how are you?” he asked, as he broke away a few minutes later to gasp for air.

“Carry on, carry on,....don’t stop,” she cried, as she tried to bring her arms up, and place them around his body.

Ramondo didn’t stop, and began to kiss her breasts. She clenched his rear cheeks tightly, as though she were on a roller coaster and couldn’t let go for dear life. She felt as though this was dear life, dearer and sweeter than anything she could dream about. She felt ecstatic, inside particularly. Ramondo felt excitement and determination, determined to continue his mission. The one thing he couldn’t feel was controlled, as he continued thrusting into her, ever harder, ever faster. Her panting grew ever-louder still, ever-wilder, until eventually she came to a climax, at which point she almost screamed with joy.

Ramondo continued until he realised that he had ‘fired the bullet’, as his effort seemed to fade. He lay sweating, on her body, still kissing her breasts, licking her nipples, and tingling inside. Doctor Gammazeta still felt a sensation, though this too began to fade. Eventually, she gained the strength to pat him on his back, as if to request he get off her body. Ramondo realised this, after which he moved to the side of her. There seemed just enough room for the two of them to rest and (just about) remain on the single bed.

As they sat beside each other, Ramondo began to realise that what he had done was inappropriate.

“How are you feeling?” she managed to ask him after a few minutes, to which Ramondo just smiled. “Are you okay?”

Ramondo just continued to smile. He considered getting away from her, but had little energy, so simply sat beside her. She took this as a positive sign from him, put her arm around his shoulder and kissed him.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” she said to him, to which Ramondo simply nodded in agreement as he lay out of breath.

“Would you like something to drink?” he asked her, a few minutes later.

"I don't fancy another cup of tea," she replied. "I've been warmed-up already."

Ramondo smiled back, and tried hard not to laugh.

"I'll go and fetch us a couple of cold drinks," he told her, before he stood up and reconsidered his options. "I think I'd better go to the lavatory first, though."

When he had finished, Ramondo went to his bedroom where he gathered his nightgown in order to cover himself up. He then went down to the kitchen, where he opened a bottle of Sangria which had been standing in the fridge to keep cool. He poured this into two glasses, which he took back upstairs, handing one to Doctor Gammazeta.

"Oh, what's this?" she asked. "These are tiny cups."

"I've brought us up a glass of wine each," he told her. "This contains high levels of alcohol and has to be consumed in small amounts."

"Oh, I hope you're not giving this to me to get me aroused all over again?" she said with a cheeky grin on her face.

"Don't worry, this is relatively mild, in comparison to other drinks they have on Earth," Ramondo re-assured her. "Go on, try a sip."

"This is alright, isn't it?" she queried, looking at him suspiciously.

"Don't worry," he said again. "Perhaps you'd better watch me have a sip first."

After Ramondo drank from his glass, Doctor Gammazeta decided to try her glass of wine.

"Mmmmmmm, that's nice," she said with a surprise. "It's better than anything I've had on the Interstellar Pilgrim. Where does it come from?"

"Oh, Arthur brought it along a few months ago," she told her.

"Arthur?" she queried, "Who's Arthur?" she said with a little excitement at the thought of another man.

"Professor Arthur Wagstaff," said Ramondo, to which her excitement faded. "Everyone has two names on Earth. Many people have more than two. Have you sorted a second name for yourself, yet?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," she said. "Besides, I thought I already had two names, Doctor and Gammazeta."

"Doctor isn't a name – it's a title," pointed out Ramondo.

"I don't suppose it's really worth it, if I'm only going to stay here a few days," she said, before she turned around and stared sweetly into Ramondo's eyes. "Would you like me to stay here a little longer?"

Ramondo wasn't sure how he should reply to that.

"I could stay here a few weeks longer, maybe, or even a few months?"

the Doctor added. "Or even a few more years!"

"Steady on, steady on," Ramondo retorted. "If you're going to consider staying, hadn't you best clear that first with Commander Ondichi and Henry."

"From what I've been hearing, Major Henry Retono could do with some additional staff here," she said. "And I'm sure the Commander won't mind."

"I think that wine has given you ideas," Ramondo said to her. "Perhaps we'd better get dressed. By the time we're both ready, we can go and have a bite to eat."

"I wasn't planning on getting dressed just yet," she then said to him. "I'm still a little sore in places. I had hoped you would finish putting the soothing cream all over my body."

"I thought you'd been soothed enough," commented Ramondo.

"Oh, please," she pleaded with him.

"Shouldn't you at least have a shower first?" Ramondo asked her.

"I suppose I could," she thought aloud, before getting up and kneeling forward on the bed. "You wouldn't mind rubbing my back?"

"I can't reach your back while you're leaning forward," Ramondo told her

"Perhaps you can start from the back of my legs?" she suggested.

As the Doctor knelt over him, Ramondo decided to start where she had suggested, and continued up towards her bottom, before he stopped just short.

"Why have you stopped?" she asked him. "Don't you like rubbing cream on a lady's bottom?"

"Oh no, I quite enjoy a lady's bottom, not too big, not too small. It's part of what distinguishes a lady," he replied. "I can't reach your back while you continue to lean forward, though."

"I think you're looking at my bottom," Doctor Gammazeta said naughtily. "I don't know – you men are all the same!"

She then decided to move back. And back again, until her rear cheeks almost touched his face.

"Is this alright for you?" she asked, to which Ramondo said nothing but gave a thumbs-up gesture to signify his approval instead.

Doctor Gammazeta then looked below her, where she noticed a large, object, standing erect. She stared at it, as it grew ever-larger, before placing her right hand around it and pulling her hand up and down. Ramondo's penis then began to foam, at which point she dived excitedly towards it, and sucked it uncontrollably.

Ramondo's arms dropped, and knocked the tub of soothing cream onto the floor, as he lay ecstatic on the bed. As she leaned forwards, her bottom moved back and smothered his face. Doctor Gammazeta was now totally dominant, as she continued sucking. Though he was breathless, he managed to stretch his arms until they felt her open breasts. She moved forward a little, and as his hands slipped, he gasped for air briefly, before she moved back, once again smothering his face.

Ramondo had never occupied this position before and was unsure how to react. His mind was occupied only by ecstasy. He gasped for air again, but was helpless, his genitals tingling continuously. He felt as though he was in a trance, one from which he couldn't escape. The trance felt so ecstatic, that it was one he never wanted to escape from.

Not until a few minutes later, perhaps, when he ejaculated into her. She had not yet finished with him, though, and continued sucking. Eventually, she realised it was over, and tried to get up, but instead fell forward onto his body. They each now lay, almost 69-like, and out of breath. After a little rest, she managed to turn around on the bed. Ramondo's felt her nipples, as though he was rubbing cream onto her. It was at this point that he looked around the bed and couldn't see the tub of soothing cream.

"Where's the cream? Where's the cream?" he asked. "Have you seen the cream?"

Doctor Gammazeta could see the tub on the floor, and as she tried to stretch to pick it up, fell onto the floor. Ramondo saw this, and called her, as though she'd had an accident.

"I'm alright," she replied, almost gasping. "Perhaps you can put the rest of the soothing cream on tomorrow..... I just want to rest for the moment."

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked her, to which she simply grinned.

"I haven't felt like that for ages," she then managed to say.

Doctor Gammazeta then began to drift asleep. Ramondo went over to see her, and thought about picking her up and putting her onto the bed, before noticing the state of the bed.

"Just my luck!" he said. "I'm going to have to wash the sheets and tidy the bed up."

Ramondo decided to leave the Doctor lying on the floor, though he placed a pillow below her head. He then went to the bathroom to have a shower, where he thought about their twosome. He became rather smug and contented when considering his performance, and that this was a top prize to add to his conquests. He now sang to himself with all the joy and excitement of a teenager who had just lost their virginity.

After he had finished and went to dry himself, he thought about what the future may hold for him. He felt as though he may be losing Zebrina, and considered whether he should go back to the Interstellar Pilgrim with Doctor Gammazeta. Then he thought about what she had mentioned earlier, staying on Earth. His emotions were beginning to wander a little, as to what he should do and who he should go for.

Ramondo then sat on the lavatory seat, wondering what to do. Though he had enjoyed himself immensely, he considered whether this was just a one-off. He remembered his thoughts earlier in the morning that Doctor Gammazeta seemed to be unfussed who she went with. Judging by the recent episode, she probably had a fair bit of sexual experience, too. She had also seemed to express interest when it was pointed out that Henry owned businesses and was without a partner. Though Ramondo had been on a high, he was now coming down to Earth.

He decided to go to his room to put on some clean clothes, after which he went into Doctor Gammazeta's bedroom, where he found her still lying asleep on the floor. He then placed his nightgown over her, partly to keep her warm and partly to cover her bare body. He then carefully pulled the sheet from the bed, and together with the duvet cover, threw them into the washing basket.

It was now almost 1 o'clock, and Ramondo was feeling hungry, so decided to go downstairs into the kitchen to make some lunch. He took this into the lounge, where he noticed his mobile laying on the coffee table. After he had eaten his lunch, he checked his mobile for messages, and noticed there was one from Henry, over an hour ago. He quickly contacted Henry's mobile.

"Ramondo – where have you been?" Henry asked at the other end.

"Sorry about that," he replied. "I had a shower after we returned from Meregill hole – I needed to clean myself."

"That was a long shower," Henry commented.

"I had to dry myself, too, get dressed and make my lunch, amongst other things," he explained. "I hope I'm not too late."

"No, no, you're okay," said Henry. "I presume you collected the rest of the crew from the Large Reconnaissance Craft?"

"Doctor Gammazeta's here," said Ramondo. "She's resting upstairs, after the long drag up the pot hole, earlier."

"Be careful with her," Henry advised. "There are other reasons she tends to rest for, too, from what I've been informed."

"I get the picture," said Ramondo. "Doctor Gammazeta said there was

water pouring down the pot hole, initially. That may be why she's resting and didn't enjoy the drag up the pot hole."

"Maybe, maybe," said Henry. "That's all the more reason to be careful with her. If she asks for a massage or to be rubbed-in with cream, just tell her you'll call the doctor – she'll start to feel a lot better then!"

Ramondo was unsure what to say, as he'd already been caught in the sex-mad Doctor's web.

"When are you going to collect the others?" Henry then asked.

"The sun's out now, so we'll probably go in the next hour or so, depending when Doctor Gammazeta wakes up," replied Ramondo.

"I suggest you watch the local weather forecast and plan ahead," Henry advised. "You know how quickly the Yorkshire weather can change."

"I'll do that," said Ramondo. "I was about to go and check on Doctor Gammazeta upstairs. She may be awake by now."

"Well remember to be careful – you may just see her lying naked on the bed, gagging for something," Henry advised again.

Once again, Ramondo was unsure what to say, except that he'd contact Henry later, to confirm when he had collected the others.

After the call ended, Ramondo went to watch the local news and weather on TV for a while, and noticed that the afternoon was to be sunny. He went back upstairs, and into Doctor Gammazeta's bedroom. She had now awoken and was lying on the bed once again, naked.

"I've been waiting for you," she announced in a smooth, saucy voice.

"Whatever for?" asked Ramondo, though he had an idea what she was referring to.

"Oh, I thought you had come to give me a massage," she said. "I need a massage, to help my poor, aching limbs."

"Perhaps if they're aching that badly, I should call a doctor," suggested Ramondo. "You never know, perhaps when you were coming up that pot hole this morning, you may have grazed yourself. It would be best if you received medical attention, to ensure you hadn't become infected."

"On second thoughts, perhaps I can make-do without a massage for now," she replied with disappointment.

"I think you'd best get dressed," Ramondo told her. "We don't want you going out naked – you might be arrested for lude behaviour."

Doctor Gamazeta eventually joined Ramondo downstairs. She suggested it wasn't worth collecting the remaining passengers on the Large Reconaissance Craft, but Ramondo said he had instructions from Henry to

pick them up. Ramondo asked her if she could come along and help him, to which she first refused, saying she had other things. He eventually managed to persuade her to come along, and as soon as it was getting dark, they headed for Meregill Hole.

It wasn't until almost 8.30 that the remaining two passengers, Philpott and Maurice, had been pulled out of the pot hole. By now, they were all hungry, so rather than cooking that night, Ramondo took them to the Ribblehead In, where they had a late supper.

When they arrived back at Ribblehead Cottage, they all had a good chat and a laugh. Ramondo was tired, and his mind went wandering regularly. In the end, he said he decided to go to bed by 10.30, while the others stayed downstairs. They found Ramondo's MP3 fascinating, and kept playing music. Ramondo didn't get a great deal of sleep though, as he seemed to have one thing on his mind, which was not helped by the music he could hear playing downstairs. One particular song seemed to be played over and over again.

"La la la, la la la la-la,
La la la, la la la la-la
I just can't get you out of my head
Boy your lovin' is all I think about
I just can't get you out of my head
Boy it's more than I dare to think about
Every night, every day
Just to be there in your arms
Won't you sta-ay, won't you sta-ay
Stay forever, and ever and ever and ever
La la la, la la la la-la,
La la la, la la la la-la....."

Whenever he tried to forget Doctor Gammazeta and think of something else, it inevitably always led back to the Doctor. He kept tossing and turning, until he eventually managed to get some sleep.

Ramondo awoke around 4.30 the next morning, and went to the lavatory. When he returned however, he noticed something else on the other side of his bed. Or was that someone else, he thought, the closer he went. It was none other than Doctor Gammazeta.

"Hello," she said chirpily. "I've been expecting you!"

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "I am in the right bedroom?" he then asked himself. "Of course I am, this is my bed, the double-bed I shared with Zebrina."

"I think you need a good, relaxing massage," she said to him slowly, before throwing the duvet wide open. "Why don't you come inside?"

Ramondo felt powerless to resist, and so went to lay on the bed.

"Good, that's better," she then said in a slow, sexy voice. "Now relax, just relax, clear all thoughts from your mind."

Ramondo couldn't clear his mind however, as Doctor Gammazeta quickly got up and knelt over him.

"Are you ready?" she said to him, before slowly placing her hands over his shoulders and gently massaging them. "Does it feel nice?" she asked, to which Ramondo nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Good, good. Would you like me to come down your body?" she asked, to which Ramondo once again acknowledged.

Ramondo was feeling nice. He began to relax, as she gently moved her massaging hands down his firm body. Ramondo's fear and worries had by now faded into the distance, and were being replaced by excitement. As she continued, she noticed a bulge beginning to appear in his pants.

"What's in there, I wonder?" she asked, though she knew precisely what lay inside.

As she moved one hand away in order to pull his pants down, his erection sprang and cum flew onto her body. As she placed her hand back onto his body, she could see his erection growing, growing, and growing more. As she massaged Ramondo, she began to consider whether to treat his erection succulently, or to go for the great docking. Doctor Gammazeta chose the latter, as she carefully placed her soft pussy lips over his erection and slowly let it inside.

"Ramondo! Ramondo!" she cried. "Give it to me!"

Doctor Gammazeta had by now stopped massaging his body as she was overcome with excitement. Excitement turned to joy, which turned to ecstasy as he was now thrusting himself further into her. She panted and panted until her climax came. She could feel Ramondo climaxing, too, and leant backwards in an effort to take in his full ejaculation.

Their excitement didn't wain, though his hard erection began to shrivel, and eventually came out of her body. This time, Doctor Gammazeta fell forward onto Ramondo, whom she held tightly. Their mouths moved closer to one-another's, until their tongues met, and they began petting, French-style. As they continued, Ramondo's erection began to grow once more. This time, he was in control, as he placed this within her again. Though he didn't push with the same vigour he had done earlier, he moved slowly and gently within her body. Her climax, which had begun to fade, was now

being revived, as they continued petting.

Together, they clasped and grasped each other, as they rolled on the bed. They touched each other in sensitive areas, some of which Ramondo had never even imagined. Though this wasn't ecstatic excitement, it felt like something else, something a lot deeper, a lot gentler. Like love.

Ramondo had by now forgotten about his manly instincts, though his erection remained within her, re-spouting, and then trickling, now and again.

Eventually, they were each disturbed, by the sun which now shone fully into the bedroom window. Doctor Gammazeta decided to take a shower, while Ramondo went to the lavatory downstairs. He then went into the kitchen, where he made them each a cup of tea. He gave one cup to Doctor Gammazeta, who had by now had her shower and went back into her own room.

The sun shone in south-east England, too. Henry also awoke early that morning in an Uxbridge hotel. He got dressed and went downstairs, taking a wander around the hotel grounds, until he heard a jingle on his mobile.

"Henry! Where are you?" queried Commander Ondichi, at the end of the call.

"Don't worry, I haven't run away," he replied. "I'm just outside the hotel – I'll be back again in a minute."

"I was wondering what had happened to you – I was knocking on your door, but heard no reply," said the Commander.

"Do you want me to come and meet you?" asked Henry.

"Not just yet, thank you, I'm just getting dressed in my room," said the Commander. "It feels quite warm to me. I'll come and meet you in the hotel foyer in five minutes."

Just then, there was a knock on the Commander's door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Professor Schmidt," was the reply. "Can I come in?"

"I'm getting dressed at the moment," said the Commander. "Can you wait for me in the foyer – you may find Major Retono waiting there."

On that note, Professor Schmidt went downstairs, where he met Major Retono, a.k.a. Henry. Though they weren't really the best of friends, and had had a number of disagreements on the Interstellar Pilgrim, they shook hands and greeted each other.

"I didn't get a great deal of sleep, last night," the Professor complained to Henry. "I found it rather noisy. If this is what it's like on the outskirts of

London, what must the noise level be like in the centre of the city?"

"I can't say I really know," confessed Henry. "It probably seemed worse here last night because we're close to the M25 and the M40."

"Well next time we come this way, I'll see that we stay somewhere else," said Professor Schmidt. "Not that I intend to come here again."

"We're near the motorways so we can get easy access around London," Henry explained. "This seemed the ideal place to stay, as we can also catch a tube into the centre of the city."

"Tube?" queried Professor Schmidt. "I'm not going to travel in a circular, hollow of metal, thank you."

"The tube is the common term for the London Underground, on which local trains carry passengers around the city," Henry explained. "There's a congestion charge for vehicles traveling into central London, which we can avoid by using this system."

"I don't know," moaned the Professor. "Noise, traffic, congestion – it gets worse."

"Lucas and Madaly are in accommodation not far from here, and I haven't heard them complain about the noise," argued Henry. "And they live near to one of Earth's biggest airports, too."

"Well, perhaps they're used to the noise," commented the Professor. "If I had a bigger say in future habitation, I'd prefer to settle on Mars,"

"Shhhh!" an alarmed Henry told the Professor, placing a finger over his mouth and looking all over to check no-one was around to hear.

"Please keep your hair on, Major, I was only about to say that Mars could easily be made habitable, if only the right actions were taken," replied Professor Schmidt.

"We don't talk 'about that' here," Henry whispered. "You can tell me your courses of action on Mars in my car, later. And you can call me Henry!"

"Now, now, gentlemen," said the Commander, who could hear them arguing as he walked down the stairs. "Is something the matter?"

"No, not really," said Henry, before the Commander looked towards Professor Schmidt, who simply grinned.

"Did you sleep well last night?" the Professor then asked, before sniggering at Henry.

"Not too bad, thank you," replied the Commander, as Henry sniggered back at the Professor. "I did find it a little noisy at times, mind you," at which point Professor Schmidt sniggered at Henry.

"Would you mind if we went up to my room for a brief discussion?" Henry requested.

“Have you seen Doctor Procyon, yet?” Commander Ondichi asked them.
“I thought we could get an early move-on.”

“We haven’t had breakfast yet,” replied Henry. “It will be served within the next half-hour, so I thought perhaps we could discuss some things in my room. I could order a few coffees, if you like.”

“What do you suggest?” the Commander asked Professor Schmidt.

“I think it may be a good idea to discuss matters first before we travel about for the day,” said Professor Schmidt.

“Very well,” the Commander then said. “I’ll give Doctor Procyon a call, to let him know where we’ll be.”

Henry then led them to his room. When they walked into his room, Henry locked the door, and looked around the room for any micro CCTV or listening devices that may have been lurking.

“Would either of you like something to drink?” Commander Ondichi asked Henry and Professor Schmidt, to which they each declined.

“Can we get a couple of things straight, first of all,” Henry then requested.

“We must be careful what we say and who we refer to in public, as we don’t wish to arouse any suspicions.”

“That seems fairly logical,” acknowledged the Commander.

“We must not, therefore, refer to anything relating to the Interstellar Pilgrim, or any of it’s missions,” Henry urged.

“Not even in here?” queried Professor Schmidt.

“We can discuss your views on Mars in a confined environment with each other, only, perhaps here or in my car,” Henry stipulated.

“Was that what you two were arguing about earlier?” asked Commander Ondichi, to which neither Henry nor Professor Schmidt said anything.

“Perhaps you may wish to explain how do you propose to inhabit Mars?” Henry then asked the Professor.

“Bombard the planet with organic asteroids,” the Professor replied. “This may create a heavier atmosphere, primarily of carbon dioxide. When Mars has enough of an organic surface, we can start to grow fauna, which will absorb the carbon dioxide and dispatch oxygen. That was how life formed on Earth, I believe.”

“It would be a long process, and would take thousands of years, if not millions,” emphasised Henry. “Besides, you won’t continue to live the same length of lifespan while the Interstellar Pilgrim orbits the asteroid belt.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen – will you two stop arguing!” Commander Ondichi instructed them both, before referring to Henry. “Was there another point you wished to raise?”

"You may have gathered, everyone here has two names, which is why I've added the name Henry," he replied. "Doctors and Professors are regularly used titles, but can I suggest that you adopt a first name. If we refer to you as Commander, people may think you're on a military mission for another country."

"I take your point," said Commander Ondichi, who then pondered to himself for a moment or two. "You can call me Simon."

Henry and Professor Schmidt acknowledged this, after which there was a knock on the door. It was Doctor Procyon, who was informed of the Commander's adopted first name, and not to discuss certain matters in public.

"Now we're all here. Do any of you have any suggestions for today?" the Commander asked the others, to which they said nothing but remained focussed at him. "It was my intention to see if we come across derelict buildings."

"Do you wish to set up accomodation in such a place?" Henry queried.

"Yes, rather like you're cottage at Ribblefield," replied the Commander.

"Ribblehead, sir, the district is known as Riblehead," Henry corrected him.

"I'm afraid it won't be as easy to rectify a derelict building to accommodate people, here in London."

"Oh, why might that be?" asked Commande Ondichi.

"London is always busy, as you may have gathered," pointed out Henry.

"You will come across derelict buildings but they will be in largely inhabited areas. Any quick replication of the place into habitable accomodation will arouse suspicion."

The Commander thought to himself for a moment or two, after which he queried how Henry went about sorting Ribblehead Cottage.

"Riblehead isn't exactly in the middle of nowhere, but it has little habitation and what there is is spread over a vast area," explained Henry. "Even the train station isn't manned. My team and I monitored the situation over a few days before we went ahead to rectify the former derelict railway buildings."

"And you didn't arouse any suspicion?" the Commander queried.

"No, not really, sir," replied Henry. "There may be the odd car or train going past every so often, but very few of the people within make the same journey every day. We checked that the buildings had been left derelict for so long, not even Network Rail were aware of them."

"So what did you do in the end?" asked the Commander curiously.

"We checked the records online with Network Rail, Northern Rail, and

even the local council, but the building didn't seem to be registered anywhere," said Henry. "As I understand it, there had been restructuring of the railways in previous years. This may be why neither company claimed ownership of the building."

"And you don't think that that sort of thing would happen in London?" queried the Commander.

No," said Henry. "I very much doubt it. We could check council records for similar derelict buildings in London, but there may then be further problems."

"And what problems might they be?" asked the Commander.

"All buildings will be registered against one council or another, as the owners are liable to pay a local tax to the council, in which case you'd have to register your ownership of the premises," explained Henry.

"But you didn't come across this with your cottage?" asked the Commander.

"No, but we registered the property in my name as the registered owner, otherwise the council may have had grounds to evict us," said Henry.

"Basically, we 'updated' council data online, showing the property was sold to me by Network Rail."

"Do you think there may be better countries on Earth in which we could live?" the Commander asked him.

"That's hard to say," replied Henry. "In many respects, this country may have too many levels of authority. On the other hand, countries without the same level of authority are by no means as well adapted and can be over-run by terrorists or dictators."

"I knew we'd be better off trying to settle on Mars," commented Professor Schmidt.

"On the other hand again, the UK is probably one of the best countries in which to 'get lost' in," added Henry. "Immigrants come here from all over the planet, and don't get picked up by authority. If you can develop technology, the UK will welcome you, whatever nationality."

"Like you, you mean?" said the Commander. "I suppose that would be one way of settling here."

On that note, they began to discuss ideas, not that Professor Schmidt was interested. Soon it was time for breakfast, and the four men went downstairs to the dining hall, where they spoke to each other and to some other guests at the hotel.

They then decided to get an early start that morning, and went all around the M25. They stopped off here and there, looking at possible derelict

sites, but found that most of them were actually part of a farm or stables. This re-inforced what Henry had suggested, that all property in and around London was owned by someone, and that it would have been purchased legitimately. On their way back to their hotel that afternoon, they stopped at the Rayners Lane showroom, where Henry briefly introduced the others to some new employees, before going into the office to meet Lucas and Madaly.

The following day, Henry drove his colleagues around the north end of the M25, and then to East London, where there seemed quite a few derelict buildings. There were 'For Sale' signs attached to them, though, re-emphasising Henry's comments. Commander Ondichi was a little disappointed, but was intrigued with London, and so the four of them took a train into the centre of the city. Henry then led the others around the West End of London, somewhere he'd often heard about but had never seen for himself. They had a snack and a few drinks, but found it rather crowded. They couldn't discuss how the Commander could return to Earth, so they returned to east London where Henry had left his car. Henry then drove to Essex and Hertfordshire, but found they never went far before coming across another town or village, so eventually returned to the hotel at Uxbridge.

On Thursday, they decided to go elsewhere, and drove north along the A1 corridor, where they stopped at a few cities on the way. Once again though, all derelict buildings had signposts signifying their sale. Commander Ondichi noticed, however, that in the difficult financial climate at the time, very few businesses were buying these premises. This could be an opportunity for him.

It was at about 7pm that night, when Commander Ondichi rang Ramondo back at Ribblehead Cottage, to let him know he and the others were on their way back.

"Where are you at the moment?" Ramondo asked.

"We're on the M62, approaching Bradford, so Henry informs me," said the Commander. "You're at the Cottage, aren't you? I sense you're in the bedroom."

"Yes, that's right," said an alarmed Ramondo, as Doctor Gammazeta lay beside him. "I'm getting changed at the moment. We're going to have a drink or two at the Ribblehead Inn, around the corner."

"Is that all of you?" queried the Commander.

"Yes, that's right," replied Ramondo. "Philpott and Murray are there

already. Doctor Gammazeta's waiting for me downstairs. She says she's looking forward to it."

"Looking forward to going to the Inn, you mean?" queried the Commander, who wasn't too sure what Ramondo may have been referring to.

"That's right," replied Ramondo, who felt as though he was in an inquisition, at which point Doctor Gammazeta got out of bed and knocked on the door. "I think the Doctor's calling for me, you don't mind if I go now?"

"No, that's okay," said Commander Ondichi, who thought he also heard the bedsprings on the other end of the line, though didn't query this. "Henry tells me that we'll meet you all in the Inn at about 9'. See you later."

At that point, Ramondo turned to Doctor Gammazeta, who was standing at the door, naked.

"Did you hear any of that?" he asked her, as she walked back towards the bed. "I think we'd better get some clothes on."

"I thought he said they won't be back until 9 o'clock," she replied. "That won't be for another two hours yet. That gives us plenty of time to make hay, whether the sun is shining or not."

"We can't afford to stay here much longer," Ramondo emphasised. "I suggest you go and make your bed in another room, while I get dressed."

"Why are you in such a rush, all of a sudden?" she asked him. "Do you stand to attention for every little thing Henry tells you?"

"He's my boss," said Ramondo. "Besides, they may be here earlier than the Commander said. The roads are a lot quieter at this time of night. They could probably get here in an hour."

"Well let's hurry up then – why wait?" she said as she pulled the duvet back, after which she was unsure whether to laugh or be disappointed when she saw that his erection had stalled.

Quickly, however, she grabbed it and began pulling it up and down.

"Are you sure about this?" Ramondo asked her. "You may not get into trouble with Henry if he finds us here together, but I will."

"Oh let yourself go," she told him. "I'll still have to face the Commander; if I go back."

"What do you mean, if you go back?" Ramondo asked with surprise.

"Don't you want to go back?"

"No, not really," she replied. "I don't know if I want to leave."

"Is that because of me?" he queried.

"To a large extent, yes," she said as she went to sit beside him. "Since

arriving here, there are so many more things I want to do, so many places I want to visit.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, as he put his arm over her shoulder. “You won’t be going far – only to the asteroid belt, beyond Mars. At the speeds the ‘Pilgrim and it’s crafts can travel at, you can come back here in next to no time.”

“I suppose so,” she said. “But I’m not sure I really want to go back.”

“Well, it’s your decision,” said Ramondo. “How sure are you that you want to stay here on Earth?”

“About 70%,” she replied.

“If you’re anything less than 100% certain that you really want to stay, then perhaps it would be best to return to the ‘Pilgrim,” suggested Ramondo. “You can re-consider your decision there. I’m sure Commander Ondichi will send another party here another day.”

“I suppose so,” she said again, as she turned to look at him. “Perhaps I could suggest that I remained here to carry out further examination of life on the planet.”

“That’s true,” said Ramondo. “Why don’t you suggest that to the Commander?”

“I’m afraid, afraid he’ll see me for what I really am,” said Doctor Gammazeta. “A cheap girl who wants a bit of men!”

“Don’t say that,” Ramondo told her. “Why ever would he think that?”

“Because I like men, maybe?” she replied, as Ramondo gave her a reassuring kiss. “You’re not the first man I’ve slept with. Now I’ve found someone I love, though, I just don’t know what to do for the best.”

“Well whatever decision you make, I’ll support you all the way,” he told her, at which point she kissed him.

They smiled at each other for a few moments, before she clambered over him.

“You know what I find intriguing,” she asked, to which Ramondo just smiled. “Female animals on Earth have their udders towards the back of their bodies, whereas we women have breasts towards the top. What do you think of my breasts?”

Ramondo just stared at them, before Doctor Gammazeta moved closer to him, smothering his face with her breasts. Ramondo then grabbed them, and slowly wiled his index fingers around her nipples. She became aroused, as he then began to lick her nipples slowly. Ramondo too, was becoming aroused as his erection grew once more. Doctor Gammazeta grabbed hold of it and began yanking it again. As she could feel juices run

from it, she decided to place it into her, and held on as he began to thrust himself.

As she knelt against his body, she panted inexorably. He was only interested in scoring, and was concerned with nothing else. It was a good job they had no neighbours who could hear her panting as it became ever louder, ever higher. She could feel her climax coming, until she could kneel no longer, and fell upon Ramondo. He clutched her body gently, as they turned together, kissing each other.

"How are you?" he asked her a few minutes later, to which Doctor Gammazeta just smiled at him.

"Happy," she then replied. "Maybe this is the way it's meant to be, to go out with a bang. Maybe this is how I will remember you."

"I'll be behind you all the way, whatever you choose to do," Ramondo told her. "You can rest here for a few minutes. I'm going to have a quick shower. We don't want to be too late arriving at the Ribblehead Inn."

By the time he had his shower, Doctor Gammazeta had 'awoken' from her dream, and was now sitting up on his bed, as he entered his room. She still sat there as he dressed.

"Aren't you having a shower?" he asked. "You are coming for a drink, aren't you?"

"I don't know," she replied. "What I want now is just to relax, in a warm, soothing bath. Would you like to bathe me?"

"Erhh, thanks, but no thanks," said Ramondo. "I've done my bit to help you relax. I'm expected to be waiting at the Ribblehead Inn. In fact, we're expected to be waiting at the Ribblehead Inn."

"I may come later on," she told him.

"But what if Henry and the others arrive home and find you in the bath?" he asked. "Or even worse, getting dressed in my bedroom?"

"I'll tell them I decided to come home, because I had a headache," she replied. "And I'll make sure I get dressed in another room."

"Yes, but those clothes you bought at Hawes market today are in my spare drawer," said Ramondo.

"Well, why don't you put them in the room next door, while I go and run my bath," she suggested.

On that note, Ramondo did as she had suggested, before leaving for the Ribblehead Inn. As he walked there, he began to feel a little lonely all on his own. No Henry, no Lucas, no Zebrina, and not even Doctor Gammazeta to talk to. He had cheered himself up a bit by the time he started to sup his pint of bitter, talking to Philpott and Maurice and

watching the action from the previous night's champions league matches on TV. Then he began to wonder about the Doctor again, what she might say when she returned to the Interstellar Pilgrim, and how he would be regarded there. Just another notch in her crotch, perhaps? Or was she more than just a cosmic tart? Then another thought crossed his mind - what if Zebrina heard about his steamy affair? How would she react? Would their relationship be over?

Ramondo tried to forget this, and instead concentrate on the football on TV. Until about 8.15, when Doctor Gammazeta walked into the inn, dressed a little scantily in the new clothes she had purchased that afternoon. Her hair was loose and wild, and she received a few wolf-whistles as she walked towards Ramondo.

"Thanks for coming," he said to her, a little surprised. "Don't you feel a little cold, like that?"

"No, not really," she replied. "It's often colder than this where I come from," to which neither he nor she expanded on, to avoid giving away their identities. "So, what do you think of me?"

"You look fine," said Ramondo, nodding his head in approval. "Would you like something to drink?"

"A GT, please," she requested.

"A gin and tonic, you mean?" he queried, to which she said yes. "I'll buy a couple of bags of crisps, too, or would you prefer peanuts. I may as well get myself another pint, too," before asking Philpott and Maurice if they wanted anything to drink.

Ramondo now felt a lot jollier now, as he walked up to the bar. The barman said he approved of his new ladyfriend, to which Ramondo just said that she wasn't local. He was then asked what had happened to Zebrina. Ramondo tried to be coy, simply saying Zebrina now had another job in Skipton and wasn't always available, but was still on his 'itinerery'. That made him feel good, as though he had two ladies to himself. When he took the tray of drinks, crisps and peanuts back to the table, he thought again about her, and knew that this wouldn't be for much longer.

"So, what do you think of the wildlife here?" he asked her as he sat down at the table.

"I told you earlier how they intrigued me, don't you remember?" she said to him. "But you know which is my favourite animal of all?" to which he shook his head. "You!"

Ramondo began to blush, and felt everyone in the room was looking at him, though when he looked around he could only see people drinking and

talking to one-another.

"You shouldn't feel embarrassed," she told him. "You should be pleased with yourself. I know I am."

This only made Ramondo more embarrassed, before he heard a large roar. He then realised that this wasn't directed at him, but was merely on the TV, where he saw a replay of a goal for Chelsea in their champions league match the previous evening.

"You like football, don't you?" Maurice asked him. "Do you support any teams?"

"I haven't got any real favourites, though I suppose I prefer Manchester United," said Ramondo. "The local teams aren't doing very well – even those from the nearest cities, Leeds, Bradford and York."

"It seems to me that everything here revolves around one thing," said the doctor. "Money."

"That's right," agreed Ramondo. "Too much in this world revolves around money. That's basically the reason for global warming and all the environmental damage that's being done to Earth."

"From what I've seen, this planet is becoming too congested," added Doctor Gammazeta. "The population of Earth is increasing at the same time as people are living longer. One day soon, this world will not be big enough for it's people, unless something is done to counter this."

"Oh there is the capacity to hold more people on Earth," insisted Ramondo. "The problem starts where tropical forests are being chopped down, they will only end up as deserts, unsuitable for human life. There seems to me to be no follow-up plans to much of today's world."

"Like what to do with the forests when the trees have all been pulled down," queried Doctor Gammazeta.

"Precisely," he replied. "There are vast empty areas, like the centre of Austrailia, which are semi-desert, but which could be developed. Then there is the increase of sea levels. I believe they should develop more desalination plants, to take in the additional sea water, purify it and use it for irrigation elsewhere in the world."

"One good thing that may come from global warming will be more eratic weather," said the Doctor. "This may provide more rain in desert-like areas."

"But will people be here to see this?" he asked. "That's the billion-dollar question. That's why Henry is trying to develop ecological ideas, in the hope that some authorities may see sense and take these ideas onboard."

“And has anyone done so?” she asked.

“He has had support from various sources,” he told her. “We only hope it isn’t too little, too late.”

Ramondo then told Doctor Gammazeta about the various schemes in California, the Isle of Lewis and on Tenerife. While they were drinking and continuing their discussions, a familiar face walked through the front door. It was Henry, who went to shake hands with the Doctor, as he was followed by Commander Ondichi, Professor Schmidt and Doctor Procyon. He then gave Ramondo ten pounds, and asked him to buy four pints of lager. Commander Ondichi went along to the bar with him. Professor Schmidt and Doctor Procyon went to watch the football with Philpott and Maurice.

“So, what has Ramondo been telling you about me?” Henry asked Doctor Gammazeta.

“We were just talking about Earth, what can be done to save the planet, and the projects you have set up,” she told him. “I didn’t know you had so many ideas and such enterprise.”

“I suppose I’ve always had enterprise. It’s just that you can’t enforce your ideology when you’re couped up in a small area, if you get what I mean,” said Henry, to which Doctor Gammazeta nodded to signify she knew what he was referring to. “To be honest, I couldn’t have done this without the help from all my team. How do you find Ramondo, by the way?”

“He’s good, very good,” she told him, though she didn’t elaborate at what he was very good at. “I like your house. Ramondo told me how you and your team sorted it all out from a couple of old, tatty buildings. I like the location – the environment, the hills, the solitude.”

“At least we shan’t hear any noise tonight,” Professor Schmidt commented, unaware of the noise which had occurred in Ramondo’s bedroom the previous nights.

The eight of them stayed in the Inn for the best part of the next hour, before Henry and Commander Ondichi felt a little tired and decided to leave. Ramondo bought a few more drinks, but when he and Doctor Gammazeta had finished theirs’, he took her outside, where they wandered along Batty Moss. The night was fresh, though Doctor Gammazeta didn’t seem to mind. The sky was clear, as they looked up towards the stars, holding one another.

“Do you see that bright star just above Whernside?” Ramondo said to her, to which she nodded. “That’s Sirius, the brightest star in the sky. One day, you might be there, searching it’s planets, looking for life.”

"Why do you say that?" she asked him.

"This time tomorrow, you'll be preparing to leave us," he said as she quickly looked around. "Don't worry, there's no one here to hear us. There's hardly anyone around here in the daytime, let alone at night."

"Well you shouldn't talk like that anyway," she told him. "How do you know I'll be visiting Sirius?"

"I don't really, but you'll be visiting some star, somewhere," sighed Ramondo.

"You don't know that," she replied. "If Professor Schmidt gets his way we may be closer than you think. Besides, I'm still not certain I'll be leaving here."

"You're not still thinking of staying here, because of me?" he asked.

"Not just because of you, though there are some reasons why I'd like to stay with you," she said to him with a cheeky grin. "Just being out here, in the fresh air, with hills and valleys to look at, as well as stars. Sometimes I feel I don't want to be anywhere else."

Ramondo smiled at her, and took his jacket off to place on her shoulders. Doctor Gammazeta smiled back at him, before she placed her arms around him, kissing him as if to say thank you. He then walked her carefully along the moss and towards the roadside, before they headed back to Ribblehead Cottage.

Friday was a day of rest for all of them. Henry invited everyone for a drink at the Ribblehead Inn as a farewell that afternoon. They couldn't afford to get too drunk, however, as Commander Ondichi and his crew were due to leave in the early hours of Saturday morning.

While most of them were celebrating along with Henry, Doctor Gammazeta remained at the cottage, caught in two minds whether to return, or to remain on Earth. She considered her commitments back on the Interstellar Pilgrim, but had now realised that there was more to life than travelling across the cosmos, though she knew that life on Earth wouldn't last as long as it would while travelling at 90% lightspeed. When she looked out of her bedroom window, though, she could see Penyghent standing sirene further down the valley, with fields of green grass, a few trees, and a little beck running behind them. From another window, she could see the 14.35 crossing Ribblehead viaduct. This seemed much more inviting than being couped-up in an asteroid. She knew a decision had to be made, but would this be the hardest decision of her life?

After everyone had supper, most of them had prepared to leave (not that

they had much to pack away). They all knew that the Commander and his crew had to make the journey down Meregill hole, and back to the Large Reconnaissance Craft, in order to return to the Interstellar Pilgrim. They couldn't afford to stay too long at the pot hole to say their farewells and give each other long handshakes, so were about to leave at 10pm, before the usual rush of men coming out of the Ribblehead Inn. They were just waiting for Doctor Gammazeta.

"Where has she got to?" Commander Ondichi asked.

"You saw she'd been shopping and has some items to take back with her. You know what women can be like. Do you want to go inside and see?" suggested Henry.

Henry and Commander Ondichi went back into the house to see what she was up to, but couldn't find her at first. It wasn't until Henry went upstairs and heard some crying in the bathroom.

"Is that you Doctor?" he asked. "Are you alright in there?"

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I'm fine, really. I just need to get myself together."

Henry called the Commander, who ran upstairs to see what all the fuss was about. As he came to the top stair, he saw Doctor Gammazeta coming out of the bathroom, and drying her eyes.

"Whatever is the matter?" he asked her.

"I'm sorry, Commander. Please don't take this the wrong way," she said to him.

"Take what the wrong way?" he asked.

Doctor Gammazeta was unsure what to say, or how to say it, as a few more tears fell from her eyes.

"You can tell me," Commander Ondichi said to her. "I won't hold anything against you. We have to go back now. Perhaps you might like to tell me in a private room when we get back."

Professor Gammazeta then began to cry again, so the Commander put his arm around her to comfort her.

"I'll keep it between you and me," he said to her. "I promise."

Doctor Gammazeta then looked up at the Commander, and gave one of her soft, sympathy-seeking frowns towards him. This time, however, it was all for real.

"I'm not sure if I want to return," she managed to blurt out, before she began to cry once again. "I've really enjoyed these past few days, and have seen another future that I can belong to."

"I think we need to get a move-on," Henry then told him. "We can't keep

the others waiting, and we can't be certain there won't be any pot holers tomorrow."

"We won't be going far away," the Commander then told the doctor. "You saw it didn't take us long to get here. Perhaps you can come back another time. There is a future here for all of us, but not just now."

Doctor Gammazeta then dried her eyes, and went back to her bedroom to pick up the items she had bought. Five minutes later, she came out, her faced washed, dried and with new make-up on to hide any signs of her tears.

"Are you ready now?" the Commander asked her.

"I guess so," she said, before following him and Henry down the stairs.

It was noticeable that she went to sit in Ramondo's car. She talked to him on the short journey, until they eventually reached Meregill hole at an hour to midnight. They then assembled the equipment to lower the crew back to the Large Reconnaissance Craft. Doctor Gammazeta was the penultimate member to leave, and gave Ramondo a special kiss, before waving goodbye, and being lowered down. Last to leave was Commander Ondichi, who shook hands with Henry and Ramondo before fastening the harness and commencing his descent down the pot hole.

When the Commander had finally reached the LRC, he informed Henry. Ramondo was now pulling up the winch one final time, and when all the equipment had been dis-assembled, he and Henry went to hide behind a drystone wall a few hundred yards away. Henry notified the Commander that all was now clear, and that the LRC could now depart.

Even though they hid behind a wall, Henry and Ramondo noticed an instant flash of light, before they clambered back over the stile by the drystone wall. By then, however, the LRC had gone, too faint even to see in the sky.

The Island Fleet

Henry felt a little sad over the next few days, having seen his best friend, Commander Ondichi, head back to the Interstellar Pilgrim. Instead, on Monday morning, he headed for his Skipton office, awaiting progress on the turbine scheme. When he checked his messages and emails, he noticed two from Andrew in Stornoway, indicating that he had been unable to get in touch, and asking Henry to contact him. Henry contacted Andrew immediately.

"Hi Andrew, it's Henry here, how can I help?" he asked.

"Ahh, Henry," came the reply. "I've been trying to get hold of you this past week. Have you been away at all?"

"I had important business in London to see to," Henry told him. "Is there something the matter?"

"Well, a slight hitch has occurred," said Andrew. "There is something I think I should tell you, however."

"Oh, what's that?" Henry asked inquisitively.

"I've been informed that the Scottish Parliament have agreed their budgets for the new fiscal year, and it doesn't appear we will be receiving any extra money to fund your project," Andrew informed him.

Henry didn't say anything to that.

"There was no problem with the project," added Andrew. "It was just that the current financial constraints mean that there wasn't much money available. It's all unofficial just at this moment, I should say, so you never know."

"Is this is going to have to wait another year?" queried Henry.

"I hope not," said Andrew. "I should say that this hasn't yet been confirmed, so there may be amendments to the original budgets agreed. There are other avenues we can pursue, however."

"Can you appeal against the budget set?" asked Henry.

"We can, but my leader doesn't think we stand much chance of getting anything," said Andrew. "I've been told that they would have been prepared to fund it if things were different, it's just that this has come at an unfortunate time."

"What other avenues can we pursue?" asked Henry.

"Well, I did suggest that you could go ahead with the project yourself," said Andrew. "We may be able to help a little, under a PPI."

"What's that?" Henry queried.

"PPI? Private-Public Initiative," explained Andrew. "I sense you're not keen on the idea?"

"No, not entirely," replied Henry. "I had hoped this could be supported by Parliament, as it would be quite a bit for my business to take on, particularly at the moment."

"If it's any consolation, Parliament support the project," said Andrew. "The thing to remember here is that the lease with Scottish Energy is due for renewal later this year."

"How long will the lease be for?" asked Henry.

"Ten years," Andrew told him. "If you can't take up the project this year, you may have to wait another five years before another similar project."

Don't forget, if you take over the lease, any profits will be yours'."

"After the original costs have been recovered," Henry stipulated. "How long will it take to recover the costs?"

"That would depend on what tariff rate you charged," said Andrew. "We don't have gas on the island, either. I would surmise that, at the current tariff, you would recover the costs in a year. It may take a little longer on the tariffs you quoted me earlier."

Henry felt sure that he could produce the infrastructure, materials and resources with a replicator or two. He also knew that there were low lying cliffs and rocks which hadn't been touched for many a year, and could be used for the items. What he was unsure of was how big a project this would be and how much assistance would be required.

"Okay, I may take on the project," he told Andrew. "I will have to consult my staff, however, to see if I can take them from other projects. There are a couple of things I would like to clarify first."

"Ochi, go ahead," said Andrew. "What queries might they be?"

"First of all, has planning permission been granted yet?" asked Henry. "I don't want to commit myself if the project gets bogged down in red tape and consultations."

"I don't think there will be any problems with that," Andrew informed him.

"I've spoken to the MP for the islands, and he's in favour. He's a pretty influential guy, so I don't think there will be much of a problem."

"Are you sure about that?" asked Henry.

"Sure enough," replied Andrew. "Besides, if the people are made aware at the offset that energy costs will be reduced, I've no doubt they will accept the project."

"The other thing I'm curious about is how the Irish project is coming along?" Henry queried. "I haven't had much time to look on the internet recently."

"I spoke to the energy chap a few weeks ago," said Andrew. "The resources are being produced at this moment. The guy thinks everything will be ready for construction by June. I can give you the guy's telephone number, if you like."

"That's okay for now," replied Henry. "Let me speak to my staff, and I'll let you know what I can come up with."

Henry knew he couldn't handle this on his own, and that even with his team it wouldn't be easy. An even bigger problem was how many of his team would be available. Professor Wagstaff, alias Arthur, was employed

by the European Space Agency on an island thousands of miles away. Also on Tenerife were Gaspar & Gonchaves (Rico), who had their own sub-business. Robinson and Frickas were assisting them on Tenerife. Closer to home, Lucas and Madaly were too busy near London to afford to put their jobs aside.

The only option was to use Ramondo, and to leave Zebrina to look after the operations of the Skipton site. When he spoke to him, however, Ramondo acknowledged the project but wasn't sure if he could afford to be taken away from his role.

"How about having an extra person at the showroom?" he suggested. "An extra salesperson, so to speak."

"Hhmmm, I don't know," muttered Henry. "I'm not sure we really need one."

"Not on a regular basis, but we can't afford to leave Zebrina on her own," Ramondo insisted.

"Do you think you can leave Zebrina to help me with the project?" Henry asked. "I don't see why she can't learn to use the replicator. After all, Madaly learnt how to use one."

"I don't see any problem with that, but I do think we could do with an extra person," Ramondo re-iterated. "Don't you think you need a person to oversee the showrooms now that we have two?"

Henry thought about this for a moment. He knew this made sense, but was reluctant to involve someone not from his team.

"You did say that one day we would have to take-on local personnel," Ramondo reminded him. "I think the time may well have come."

"I don't know," said Henry. "Arthur has already blurted-out where we originally came from. Now that I've put that right, I don't want anyone to find out our identities again."

"From what you told me, Arthur only informed a few people about his own identity," replied Ramondo. "Besides, he mentioned this to fellow professors, not the former president of the United States."

"What do you suggest then?" asked Henry. "More to the point, who do you suggest we should employ?"

"How about Richard Copeland?" said Ramondo. "You remember - the guy who saved Zebrina in one of the caves near Ribblehead. We showed him our car, and we even drove him in it a few times."

"Do you still keep in touch with him?" asked Henry.

"We exchanged Christmas cards," said Ramondo. "Zebrina spoke to him at Easter, too. We have his telephone and mobile numbers."

"How do you know he'll be available?" queried Henry.

"We don't," said Ramondo. "We can find out though."

"Let me think about it," Henry said to him.

"I'm sorry to have to say this, but that's all you're doing at the moment, thinking about things," commented Ramondo. "The longer you think about these matters, the longer they will take. And it may then be too late to do anything about it."

Henry wasn't very happy. He said nothing, but stared at Ramondo.

"If we don't act, someone else may come along with these ideas and projects," said Ramondo. "Frank Marshall is already using our idea of vehicles. Gaspar and Gonchaves have considered going it alone. And from what you've told me, someone in Ireland has already developed a similar Atlantic turbine project."

Henry acknowledged Ramondo's statement, but again, said nothing.

"Don't let this opportunity pass you by," Ramondo added.

"I accept what you're saying and agree that we may need to take on staff," replied Henry. "I don't think this is the right time, though."

"Because of the recession?" asked Ramondo. "Don't drag us down, because we aren't in a recession. All the vehicles we sell have been replicated."

"And that's how I want things to stay," Henry told him. "For now, anyway."

"Can we at least use Richard for a few days?" asked Ramondo.

"Do you know where Richard Copeland lives?" asked Henry. "Moreover, do you know if he'll accept this offer?"

"I believe Richard lives in Dentdale," said Ramondo. "I don't know if he'd be interested in the role, but we can make inquiries."

"Okay, go ahead," agreed Henry, reluctantly. "Keep me informed at all times."

The following day, Ramondo asked Zebrina to contact Richard, to see if he was available. Richard told her that he was employed in a retail position at the time, but that bearing the recession in mind, he never felt too comfortable. Zebrina said a new car salesperson position may become available at Skipton. Richard confessed that he wouldn't mind the opportunity, though the journey from his home in Sedbergh had to be born in mind.

Henry, in the meantime, notified Andrew MacDougall at Stornoway that he was prepared to fully finance the Atlantic project himself, after which Andrew would seek to gain planning permission for the project.

Henry had his own views on the project, and wasn't too sure how precisely to handle it. He decided to speak to Rico, and request the labour of Robinson and Frickas. Rico agreed to this, on condition that he could recruit local people into his business. At first Henry wasn't too keen on the request, to which Rico pointed out that local employees had to be sought in order to keep the business mushrooming. He also emphasised that with plenty of stock and materials in the warehouse, new staff only had to come to the site to pick up the necessary items. Rico stipulated that any new stock or materials would be replicated only by himself or Gaspar, and that no-one would discover how everything was produced. Henry agreed to his request, though he didn't know that Rico had already taken on his female companion as a receptionist.

Henry then went on the internet, to look for the Irish turbine project. He noticed a construction date had been set, but decided to query any further details with Andrew, when he met him at Stornoway airport the following Thursday.

"Have you read the latest about that Irish Atlantic turbine?" Henry asked Andrew after they had shaken hands and greeted one-another.

"To be honest, I haven't had much time to look into that recently," replied Andrew. "I've been more concerned with our own scheme, to tell you the truth."

"Have you arranged local meetings regarding planning permission yet?" queried Henry.

"Yes thanks," replied Andrew. "The first of these took place last Friday."

"Did you indicate the financial benefits, at the local consultations?" asked Henry.

"I did point this out, but there was so little opposition to your scheme that it didn't seem necessary to fully highlight the case," admitted Andrew.

"Has the infrastructure been completed yet?"

"Not just yet," Henry told him. "I'm sorting my staffing out, first. I'll let you know when they're all ready."

"I may be able to send some of my labourers along to help," suggested Andrew.

"That shouldn't be necessary," Henry said quickly, not wanting anyone to muscle-in on the work, and find out about him and his team. "I haven't seen anything on the news about that Irish project? Have you?" he asked trying to change the subject.

"No, I haven't, actually," said Andrew.

"That's a shame – we could certainly do with a positive story on the news,

instead of this recession,” Henry commented. “From what I last saw, the work on it is about to begin.”

“I’ll tell you what, when we go back to my office, I’ll check the latest on the internet,” suggested Andrew.

“Would you mind if we went and had a bite to eat, first?” asked Henry. “I haven’t eaten since I got up this morning.”

“That’s fine by me,” said Andrew, before he looked at his watch. “Is that the time? We can discuss things at the Hebridean Man.”

Andrew led Henry to his car, and on the brief journey to the Hebridean Man, they discussed lunch. When they arrived there, Andrew went to order drinks, while Henry went to order lunch.

“So, how’s your business doing in these difficult times?” Andrew asked Henry, back at the dinner table.

“Not too bad, on the whole,” Henry told him. “My motors weren’t selling as well as they did six months ago, but we’ve remedied that by setting up a new showroom near Heathrow.”

“Near the airport?” queried Andrew.

“It’s a few miles from the airport actually, perhaps better described as being on the outskirts of London,” admitted Henry. “Sales seem to be going fairly well.”

“These are very difficult times for motor manufacturers,” commented Andrew.

“The good thing about my motors is that they’re eco-friendly,” Henry told him. “They run on digital motors, which don’t require any fossil fuels.”

“You seem to be quite an eco-friendly businessman,” Andrew said curiously

“Have you heard about the new motor manufacturers in America?” Henry asked.

“I heard something about a green car company on the news the other day, but it was just a few words while they were talking about the demise of GM and Chrysler,” said Andrew.

“This company are constructing solar-powered vehicles,” explained Henry.

“Nice idea,” muttered Andrew. “I don’t think it’ll catch on here though. We don’t get enough sun to warrant such vehicles.”

“These motor manufacturers are based in California,” said Henry. “Solar-powered vehicles should do fairly well there. Apparently the MD reckons they’ll sell quite well, even in the current climate.”

“Well good luck to them, I say,” commented Andrew. “I suppose California is the right sort of place to try out solar-powered energy. Did you get to

hear about this company in your neck of the UK?”

“Not really,” said Henry. “I happen to know the MD personally, and the company.”

“Oh really,” said an intrigued Andrew.

“I happen to be a shareholder in the business,” Henry told him.

“Ahh, perhaps that explains where you get your money from,” laughed Andrew.

“Not really,” replied Henry. “We shareholders won’t get a penny until next year. We’ve had to put money into the business to ensure it’s buoyancy in the current climate.”

“I can see this project being a success, but I can’t imagine vehicles around these parts being powered by the sea, can you?” commented Andrew.

“No, I don’t suppose I can, but there are other ways we can develop eco-friendly transport, as my engineers have shown,” replied Henry.

“This digital motor of yours, can you tell me a little about how it runs?” asked Andrew.

“There are several chips which rotate as the car moves,” explained Henry.

“This movement creates energy, which the chips pick up, and become continually charged as the car is in motion.”

“What are these cars like for speed and efficiency?” asked an intrigued Andrew.

“Very similar to your regular motor,” said Henry. “Everything runs similarly, it’s just that the energy comes from a different source. The car still requires the battery for it’s initial starting, but we’re working on something to eliminate that necessity.”

“How very interesting,” said Andrew. “Do you rely on the sales of your cars for revenue?”

“Fortunately not,” said Henry. “My main source of income at the moment comes from my solar-panel industry in Tenerife.”

“I can see you truly are a man of the world,” chuckled Andrew.

“A friend of mine came to visit me one day last year,” explained Henry. “He was impressed with the solar panels on my house, and asked if we could fit the same in his property in Tenerife.”

“And I suppose the idea took off from there?” queried Andrew.

“Yes indeed,” said Henry. “His employers were impressed with the panels, and had some fitted to their premises. Several hotels caught on to the idea, and it all snowballed from there.”

“How very interesting,” said an intrigued Andrew, as the waiter came along with their meals.

After they had eaten, and had a little more beverage, they went to Andrew's office in the local town hall, to check on Andrew's mail.

"Is there anything important?" Henry asked.

"Not really," said Andrew. "Before we go, I'd like to check on any messages I may have received on my PC this morning. "

"You don't mind if I make a visit to the gents, in the meantime?" queried Henry.

"No, not at all," said Andrew. "Turn left outside my office. You'll find the gents at the end of the corridor."

Andrew had received a few emails, which he read and replied to, before Henry returned.

"While we're here, would you like to check on the latest update of that sea turbine scheme in Ireland?" he suggested.

"By all means," Henry replied. "Perhaps we shouldn't dwell on that too much for the time being, though. I'd like to get out and view the possible sites in which to construct our turbine."

"Yes, sure," said Andrew. "We can give the company a call tomorrow."

Andrew had a brief look at the website, which stated that the project in Ireland was now under construction, but that it wasn't perceived to be completed until mid July. He then took Henry to his car, and drove him to the site to the north of the island where the turbine was intended to be completed.

"Hhmm," muttered Henry. "The cliffs are a bit straight."

"Is there a problem?" queried Andrew.

"Well, I had thought that it would be better to start from where there was a bend in the cliffs," replied Henry.

"Oh, why is that?" asked Andrew.

"We'll have to put the 'shoulders' of the turbine in from some point. We could then cut into the bend in the cliff to leave a 90 degree angle," Henry explained. "From there, we can drill a large hole into which the 'shoulders' can be placed."

"Oh yes, of course," said Andrew. "There are some twists in the cliffs a little further on. You can see them from here, on a clear day."

"Would you mind taking me there, thanks," Henry requested.

"I'm afraid the road doesn't run that far," Andrew told him. "The cliffs are not far away, so we can walk there."

As Andrew led the way to the cliffs, Henry told Andrew how the turbine would be constructed.

"A large gap will then have to be drilled into the cliffs, about the same

length as the turbine, from the other point,” said Henry.

“From the other point you mentioned, which would be at right angles to the cliff?” queried Andrew.

“Yes, that’s it,” acknowledged Henry. “A large hole can then be drilled from that point to the large gap I just mentioned, in which the ‘shoulder’, can then be put through. At each end would be placed ‘arms’, which would connect the turbine to the ‘shoulder’.”

“Ahhhhh, I get you now,” said Andrew. “I know you’ve told me all this before, but how will the energy be conveyed?”

“There will be two small generators at either end of the ‘shoulder’,” explained Henry. “As the waves sweep against the turbine, turning it vigorously, the energy released will be conveyed through electro-magnetic wiring to the generators.”

“Wasn’t you going to have one generator within the shoulder?” queried Andrew.

“That was the original idea, but I thought two generators would be better in case one develops problems,” said Henry. “There would be a main generator between the ‘shoulders’, which would pick up the total energy. This would then need to be conveyed to the main generator on the island.”

“How long do you think it would take to construct?” asked Andrew.

“I don’t really know, to be totally honest,” replied Henry. “However, if the Irish turbine project is due to take a couple of months, I’d give this scheme a similar length of time.”

“Isn’t the Irish turbine project going to be larger than this one?” queried Andrew.

“Yes indeed, from what I gather, but I’d rather give something like this a longer timescale,” said Henry. “If it’s all completed in a shorter time, all’s well and good. If it takes a few weeks longer, then so be it. As long as it’s completed correctly and is in good condition.”

“Oh yes, indeed,” agreed Andrew. “How long do you think it will take to test the turbine?”

“Again, I don’t really know,” replied Henry. “If it’s all done properly, it shouldn’t take more than a week, I shouldn’t have thought.”

“Good, good,” said Andrew, before he pointed out the cliffs Henry had requested to see, which were now just half a mile away, though they would have to walk a little further to go around the cliffs.

“That looks just like the sort of place I was looking for,” commented Henry, before a strong gust of wind blew across, almost knocking them over. “This should make a pretty good place for the turbine. With gusts

that strong the turbine should work perfectly.”

“Oh, these gusts are pretty common here,” Andrew said to him, before turning his attention. “Wait ‘til we get to that cliff edge. You’ll see the power of the waves crashing against the cliffs.”

When they got to the cliff edge, Henry was looking for some make-shift steps, to go down to the bottom of the cliffs, but Andrew informed him that there weren’t any.

“Is there no beach at this point?” Henry asked.

“Not really,” replied Andrew. “Why, what do you think of the place?”

“Pretty good indeed,” muttered Henry. “Are the waves always this strong?”

“Pretty much,” replied Andrew. “The cliffs themselves are relatively low, which may be quite handy itself.”

“You say there’s no beach at this point?” Henry queried. “Not even when the tide goes out?”

“I don’t believe so,” said Andrew. “I don’t know how low the water gets at low tide around this point, though.”

“Hhmmm,” mumbled Henry. “We can’t really go down and find out how far below sea level the surface is, can we?”

“I wouldn’t advise it,” warned Andrew. “The sea is very cold here. You probably wouldn’t last too long in the water before you catch hyperthermia.”

“What, at this time of year?” asked Henry.

“Even at this time of year,” Andrew told him.

“Are there any fisherman around here?” asked Henry

“There’s a tiny fishing village a few miles away,” said Andrew. “Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering whether anyone may know the depth of the sea at this point,” said Henry. “Perhaps a fisherman would have a good idea.”

“Possibly, possibly,” said Andrew.

Henry thought to himself about this, and peered over the rim of the cliffs to see if he could see the sea floor beneath the waves below.

“Why don’t we go back to the car,” suggested Andrew, while Henry still peered over the cliffs. “I can then take you to the village. I suppose it’s more of a tiny hamlet, really. It’s only a few miles away.”

Henry, though, continued pondering to himself.

“You don’t mind if we go back?” asked Andrew. “I can face the gusts when they’re blowing at us from the sea, but if a gust that strong came at us from the other direction, we might just end up in the sea. With a broken

neck!"

"Okay, okay," agreed Henry, before he and Andrew turned around and headed back to the car.

Andrew then drove the short distance to the tiny village of Port Nis. They had a brief look around the village but could see no-one, let alone a fisherman. Andrew then parked the car at the harbour, before he and Henry got out, and walked along the harbour wall. Again they could see no-one, so they decided to walk around. Eventually, they met a middle-aged lady, who smiled at them.

"Can I help you at all?" she asked them. "You look like you're lost."

"Oh no," laughed Andrew. "Are there any fisherman around at the moment?"

"There are no fishermen around here at this time," the lady replied. "There are very few fishermen left here at all."

"Ai, I thought as much," said Andrew. "Thanks very much anyway."

"If it's urgent, I can tell my son when he gets back," the lady replied.

"Is your son a fisherman?" queried Andrew.

"Oh no, he works in town," said the lady. "He owns one of the boats in the harbour. I can give him a message, if you like. Who shall I tell him to call?"

"I'm Councillor MacDonald," Andrew told the lady, as he shook her hand and gave her the number of his mobile phone.

"Councillor, eh?" said the lady. "You're not going to build a new supermarket in this tiny village, are you?"

"No, no, no, it's nothing like that at all," laughed Andrew. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

"About 4.15," said the lady. "Shall I ask him to meet you here?"

"I think we can wait that long, don't you?" Andrew queried with Henry, before turning to the lady again. "Ask your son to him to meet us at the harbour, at about 4.30, if that's okay, otherwise can he let me know on my mobile."

"Will you be doing anything to the harbour, at all?" asked the lady. "It is getting rather old, don't you think?"

"Ahh, that's what gives the harbour its attraction," suggested Andrew.

"What attraction?" asked the lady. "You can see how many visitors we get to the harbour, can't you!"

On that note, Andrew and Henry said farewell to the lady, after which Henry asked what they were supposed to do for another hour-and-a-half.

"That's simple," said Andrew. "There's a pub at the end of the village. With 24 hour opening times now in operation, I'm sure we can find somewhere

warm to sit down and something to talk about.”

In fact, the pub was in the next village, though not that it was far away. Fortunately, they found the pub open, and went inside for a drink or two. Andrew got out his map of the isle of Lewis and showed it to Henry, pointing out where they had been.

“That cliff we visited earlier, it wasn’t very long,” queried Henry.

“That is correct,” replied Andrew. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Probably,” said Henry. “We may be able to place the ‘shoulder’ between the ends of the cliff. That would save the need to drill a gap at one point in the cliffs, from which we can attach one of the arms which will hold the turbine, to the shoulder.”

“So you think that’s the right place to put the turbine?” queried Andrew.

“Well, I can’t really be sure until we’ve had the results of a survey,” said Henry.

“What survey would that be?” asked Andrew. “To check the level of the sea at that point on the cliffs?”

“I’d like to get a better idea of the cliffs themselves, assess what they’re made of,” said Henry. “Not all forms of rock react in the same way, nor have the same strength.”

“Those cliffs must be pretty strong, surely, to have lasted thousands of years, no, millions of years,” pointed out Andrew.

“I know, I know,” said Henry, “but some rocks are hard and cumbersome to break down. I don’t want to spend too much time demolishing a hole in the cliffs, not to mention the cost.”

“I see what you mean,” said Andrew. “I’ll see what I can find out for you.”

Henry and Andrew remained in the pub for over an hour, before they decided to go back out and head for the harbour, where, hopefully, a man would be waiting to meet them. It was still windy outside, though the sun had by now come out.

It was a pleasant stroll to the harbour, where they didn’t have to wait too long before a young man appeared.

“Hello there,” he said. “Might one of you be Councillor MacDonald?”

“Yes, that’s me,” said Andrew. “Are you the owner of one of these boats in the harbour?”

“Ai, that I am,” said the young man. “I understand I may be able to help you?”

“I’m sure you can, I’m sure you can,” said Andrew. “It’s just a small query at this moment, but do you know the name to the narrow cliffs that jut out at the Butt of Lewis?”

"We don't really have a name for those cliffs, but I believe they're shown on maps as Cunndal," replied the young man. "Is that it?"

"Well, you see, we'd like to know how low the tide gets at that point, or whether a beach is unveiled at low tide?" asked Andrew.

"I believe a beach is unveiled at low tide a little further along to the south of Cunndal, but I don't believe the depth at that point is high enough for any beach to materialise."

"Oh thanks, thanks," said Andrew and Henry, to which the young man asked what the query was about. Andrew and Henry looked at each other, unsure what to say. This was where Henry's psychic aspect came in handy, as he stared at Andrew.

"Yes indeed," Andrew replied, as if Henry had asked him to confirm that planning permission has been granted. Henry then asked, psychically of course, if it would be okay to divulge the scheme, to which Andrew said okay, but not to say too much just yet. Henry then told the young man about the scheme.

"Oh yes, I've heard about something like that," said the young man. "Do you know when it will be constructed?"

"I'm afraid we have no planned dates for that as yet," said Andrew.

"Planning permission hasn't yet been confirmed."

"We're just trying to ascertain how large the turbine should be, and what infrastructure would be required for the project," added Henry.

"Oh, right," said the young man. "Would you mind if I go now? I've got a few friends to meet in the local'."

Andrew and Henry said farewell to the young man and shook his hand, before walking back to the car.

"So, what now, then?" asked Henry.

"Is there anything else we need to find out?" Andrew asked him.

"Not that I can think of," replied Henry. "Thinking about it, I suppose we should have found out about these things before arranging consultations."

"Probably, probably," said Andrew. "This isn't just your average run-of-the-mill scheme, however. We need to see if the people of the island are prepared for such a scheme. I don't think planning permission will be a problem."

"Let's hope not," muttered Henry. "We'll have to find contractors to carry out the work, when it's all agreed."

"I've got a list of some contractors who the council have used, in my office," Andrew told him. "Would you like to go back to the office this afternoon – it shouldn't take long."

Henry looked at his watch, which was gone 4.30.

“Good Lord, is that the time?” he half-shrieked with surprise. “I’m staying here tomorrow and over the weekend, so I can come and pick up that list tomorrow, if you’d prefer?”

“I think that would be a better idea,” agreed Andrew.

Henry went to meet Andrew the next morning in his office, where he picked up a list of contractors which he had put together. He looked carefully through the list.

“I see some of the contractors are from the mainland,” he queried.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Andrew. “There are a few local contractors, but they may not have all the plant & machinery you may require for the project.”

“Well, thanks anyway,” Henry acknowledged. “I’ll have a closer look over a pint, and go and visit some later today.”

“Oh, by the way, I meant to tell you yesterday, I’m going to a meeting in Edinburgh next Friday,” Andrew mentioned before Henry left the office.

“Perhaps you may want to meet me there for an update on things?”

“Hhmmm, possibly,” replied Henry. “I’ll have a look in my diary when I get back.”

“Actually, I’d be interested to see those cars of yours,” Andrew then said, after which Henry turned around with interest.

“Come to think of it, I don’t believe I have anything on next Friday,” he said. “I can bring one along perhaps.”

“You say they’re eco-friendly,” queried Andrew.

“Oh yes, certainly,” said Henry. “Whereabouts are you staying?”

“At the Novotel, just outside the city,” replied Andrew. “Do you know Edinburgh at all?”

“Not really,” said Henry. “It would be nice to visit the city, though.”

“Well it won’t be difficult to find the hotel,” Andrew told him. “It’s just off the end of the M8, where it meets the city orbital road, not far from the airport. I’ll send you the details by email.”

“Thanks very much,” said Henry. “I hope to confirm things when I get back.”

“Well mind how you go,” Andrew said to Henry as he left the office.

“See you next Friday, if all’s well,” said Henry, as he waved farewell before closing the office door.

Henry then went back to his hotel, to take a look at the list of contractors.

He had a map of Stornoway on him and so decided to go and see some of the Contractors himself. He told them about the scheme and discussed requirements with them, whether they could meet them, how much this would cost and how long it may take. In the end, he took the details of each of them (there were three in all on Stornoway) before going back to his hotel to have a closer look at the details.

Henry hired a car for the weekend, and drove to the cliffs at Cunndal, though he had to walk the last half mile to get to the cliffs themselves. He took his brief case with him, in which was a small replicator with the designs of the infrastructure for the scheme. He considered using the replicator against the land, to create the infrastructure, but in the end thought it best not to. The infrastructure concerned would be too large and heavy for one man to replicate, particularly as the winds were strong.

Henry contacted Ramondo back at Skipton, and asked if he could come along the next day. Ramondo, however, wasn't too sure, so said he'd check out any flights that weekend, and call him back.

Ramondo looked on the internet, and found that though there were some flights on Saturday evening, he would still have to travel to get to a suitable airport in the first place. After Ramondo suggested booking in at a hotel on the outskirts of Glasgow later that night, before catching a flight the next morning, Henry lost interest in the idea. Instead, he considered arranging the use of a heavy vehicle for a couple of weeks time, and to come back with Ramondo, and if possible, Lucas as well.

Henry went back to his hotel and looked at the lists of contractors. He decided to visit the Isle of Lewis on Sunday, and stayed at Stornoway for the next evening. On Monday, he went to visit some other contractors on the island, to see what they had to offer, as he didn't fancy involving contractors coming across from the mainland. He didn't make any arrangements at the time, but took details of the work entailed, and their expense, back to Skipton with him, to look over with Ramondo.

By the middle of the week, the two of them had decided which contractors to hire, and so made arrangements for the work to be carried out on the turbine. A commencement date was set for July 25th, after which Henry began to concentrate on his next expedition – a trip to meet Andrew at Edinburgh on Friday, and show him the digital car he and his team had designed.

Henry checked over his digital car on Thursday, to ensure everything was in good condition and running smoothly. On Friday morning, he awoke a

little earlier than usual and had a shower to freshen himself up, and after breakfast, he set off for Edinburgh. Though it was rush hour, the local roads seemed fine, until he got to Sedburgh. He then proceeded through the traffic to the M6, which he followed beyond Carlisle and eventually took the A7 to his final destination. It was about midday when he reached the Edinburgh orbital road, which he followed to the hotel where Andrew was staying.

When Henry booked into the hotel, he noticed Andrew's name on the register, and after going up to his own room to sort his baggage, went back downstairs to the hotel foyer, where he read a Top Gear magazine while waiting for Andrew. Henry was facing the stairs, expecting Andrew to come down at any time, but instead felt a tap on his shoulder from behind.

"Hi there, Henry, have you been waiting here long?" was the question, after which Henry turned around, to find Andrew.

"Hi there," Henry said to him after shaking his hand. "Have you just come from that meeting?"

"Ai, it lasted a little longer than I expected," Andrew told him. "We had sandwiches and refreshments laid-on, so we were obliged to stay back for lunch, too."

"Well you know what they say - waste not, want not," chuckled Henry. "Besides, I wouldn't turn down anything free of charge."

"You don't mind waiting a short while, while I go and get changed?" asked Andrew.

"No, no, that's okay," replied Henry. "I could do with some lunch of my own, to be honest. I'll meet you down here in half hour."

In actual fact, they didn't have to wait that long, though Henry was still eating his sandwich when Andrew arrived in the foyer. Henry scoffed the rest of his sandwich in no time, before leading Andrew to the hotel car park and his digital car. He was about to open the bonnet, when Andrew suggested they go for a ride in the hills of southern Scotland. Above all, Andrew wanted to get a feel of the vehicle before looking into it.

Along the way, they stopped at a local café, where they had some tea and scones. Henry wanted to show the car to Andrew, but little did Henry know that Andrew had been monitoring the fuel gauge, and was impressed that this had hardly moved.

Henry did eventually get his chance to tell Andrew how the car worked.

"I see you still have a fuel gauge in this car of yours?" Andrew queried.

"Yes, this only comes into play after the car has started," he explained. "It

operates similarly to a normal car initially. After the ignition, the normal process, whereby the fuel is used to run the car, will apply. Once the car is in motion, however, the chips in the car will turn and gain energy as the car moves.”

“And do these run the car thereafter?” asked Andrew.

“That’s about it,” replied Henry. “By the time the car has moved into third gear, the chips will have been rotating and gaining energy. The third gear chip will have gained sufficient energy to propel the vehicle, and likewise, so will the fourth and fifth gear chips prior to changing into these gears.”

“Doesn’t the car have chips for first and second gear?” asked Andrew.

“There are chips for first and second gears, but these are used more to move the car when it is turning, or pulling away from traffic lights or roundabouts.”

“And by the time the car has been running, the first, second and reverse gear chips will have gained sufficient energy, too, I suppose,” said Andrew.

“This wasn’t the original design,” Henry informed his colleague. “We’re constantly examining ways of improving the vehicle.”

“Have you sold many recently?” asked Andrew.

“Most of our recent sales have come at our Rayners Lane showroom, in north-west London,” admitted Henry. “I’ve been considering moving our local workshop in Skipton to somewhere else, but I haven’t really had much time to look into this.”

“I suppose there are several vacant stores in which you can set up showrooms in Leeds and Bradford,” commented Andrew.

“I know, I know,” sighed Henry. “I don’t seem to have the time available to go and visit such sites, what with this project.”

“You do have a team of your own, don’t you?” Andrew queried.

“I do, but it’s only a small team,” said Henry. “I’ve sent four of them to Tenerife, and can’t see them coming back in the near future, plus I’ve got a couple more at Rayners Lane.”

“Well you may need to increase the size of your team,” Andrew suggested. “You can’t be a little boy all your life if you want to play in the big pool.”

“True, I suppose,” Henry sighed again, not wishing to let-on where he and his team originally came from. This did make him realise however, that now may be the best time to take on new staff. But how would he do it, and still retain his and his team’s initial privacy.

“Shall we get a move on?” Andrew suggested, though Henry was still in deep thought. “Are you alright, Henry?” Andrew queried.

“Erhh, yes, yes,” muttered Henry. “I was just thinking to myself.”

“Would you mind if I have a go of the car?” asked Andrew.

“No, no, not at all,” said Henry. “You don’t mind me asking, I suppose you have full insurance to drive other vehicles?”

“You assume correct,” said Andrew. “I require full insurance as I often drive council vehicles.”

“Of course, silly me,” said Henry.

“Before I get in the car, is starting the vehicle similar to the normal process with other cars?” Andrew queried.

“It’s just the same as starting an ordinary car,” confirmed Henry.

“Might there be any tips or advice you have for driving this car of yours?” asked Andrew.

“Not really,” replied Henry. “Have a little drive along these country roads. When you feel comfortable enough, you may want to head for the motorway.”

Andrew agreed, and, as he pulled away, signalling and looking around him, the car seemed no different to anything else he had driven. He felt comfortable in it almost immediately. Andrew continued driving, and talking to Henry as they went along, and eventually followed signs to the M8. Once again, he noticed that the fuel gauge hadn’t gone down, but wanted to give the car a good run along the motorway, always checking the fuel gauge as they went along.

By the time they arrived back at their hotel, Andrew was half-convinced by the digital car, and was considering putting it forward to the council back on Stornoway as an alternate option to replace their current fleet. Like all canny Scotsmen, however, he needed a little more convincing.

“I enjoyed that,” Andrew said to Henry when he stopped the car back at the hotel.

“Good, good,” replied a satisfied Henry. “Is there anything else you’d like me to show you?”

“Well, I’m curious as to how the chips obtain the energy to drive the vehicle,” said Andrew.

“It works on basically the same principal as the turbine,” Henry told him.

“As it rotates, energy is produced. The faster it rotates, the more energy is obtained.

“I’m booked here overnight, are you staying here as well?” queried Andrew, to which Henry nodded in acknowledgement. “You wouldn’t mind going out again for a drive tomorrow, would you?”

“No, not at all,” replied Henry. “Is there anywhere you’d like to go at all?”

Perth, Stirling, or Loch Lomond perhaps?"

"Oh, I was thinking of driving a bit further than that," said Andrew.

"I don't mind going to visit Aberdeen, perhaps?" said Henry.

"I was actually thinking of going all the way to Ullapool," said Andrew. "I could catch the ferry to Stornoway from there."

Henry was rather surprised.

"You don't mind, do you?" asked Andrew.

"Well, well... I don't mind," said Henry. "Aren't you booked to fly back, though?"

"I am, but I just thought it would be a good way of testing the car," said Andrew.

"Is there anything in particular that you'd like to test out with the car?" Henry then queried.

"I'll come straight to the point," said Andrew. "I'm into eco-friendly devices and, like you, believe we can make better use of natural resources and energy. Our fleet of vehicles are coming up to their 'retirement', and from what you've shown me of your digital car, I think a group of these would make good replacements, particularly if we can save on fuel expenses."

"How many would you want for the fleet?" asked Henry.

"Oh probably just a couple of these at first," Andrew replied. "We could do with a few vans, too, one small and one large. Do you have any in production?"

"No, not at the moment," admitted Henry. "I'm sure we have some designs for vans, but due to the current recession, we haven't developed them as yet."

"Well, I'm sure you realise, that as a Councillor, I want to give everything to be purchased a thorough check," added Andrew.

Henry thought carefully about what Andrew had said.

"If it were me, I'd be happy to buy one of your cars, but I have a duty to my citizens of the Hebrides," Andrew added. "I have to ensure my citizens' council tax is used to best effect."

"Are you a little sceptical about the fuel gauge?" queried Henry. "I can show you the chips, by jacking-up the car, if you'd like?"

"No, no, that won't be necessary," Andrew advised. "I would like to give the car a good run, though, so I can be absolutely sure that this does run on the digital chips and not on petrol, or even worse, that the fuel gauge has been tampered with. Is that okay?"

"I'll tell you what," said Henry. "Why don't we go to Inverness, or perhaps head for Skye. We can see Glen Coe, have lunch at Fort William, and visit

the Unknown Soldier – I believe his cemetery or epitaph is somewhere up that way. Or would you rather visit Loch Ness? What do you say?”

“Hhmmm, I like the idea,” said Andrew. “There’s just one snag, though.”

“Oh, what’s that?” queried Henry.

“I’m booked to fly back to Stornoway at 4.30,” Andrew told him.

“Well why don’t we get an early start,” suggested Henry. “It’s light by 5am at this time of year.”

“Okay, okay,” said Andrew. “I suppose it’ll be a good drive, though probably not as far as Ullapool.”

"It may be further, actually, depending how far we get," said Henry. "Don't forget, we'll be driving back here to Edinburgh afterwards, so it'll be twice the distance. Perhaps we can at least have lunch at Loch Lomond?"

"Okay then, it's agreed," said Andrew. "I'll prepare my baggage so you can drop me off at the airport in the afternoon."

They each went to their rooms to refresh themselves, and prepare for the next day, before they went down for tea at the hotel, followed by several drinks that evening.

The next day, Henry and Andrew woke up early, before meeting downstairs in the foyer. Each ready as ever, they discussed plans before handing in their room keys and booking out of the hotel. Ever-curious and not the easiest person to be convinced, Andrew read the mileometre when they got into the car, and by 7 o'clock, they set off, while the motorways were relatively empty.

Henry and Andrew decided to stop at services halfway to Glasgow to have breakfast, but by 8 o'clock, were back on the road again. Andrew took to the steering wheel this time, still monitoring the mileometre. He wanted to get past the Glasgow traffic before the regular hustle & bustle of the weekend shoppers hit the motorways heading for the city. Once past Glasgow, they headed for the small town of Balloch, on the shores of Loch Lomond, and eventually pulled into a car park near the loch.

"So, how do you feel?" asked Henry.

"Oh, fine, fine," replied Andrew, as he stretched his legs.

"Shall we head for the local shop, or do you want to go to the lake first?" asked Henry.

"Loch, man, loch," insisted Andrew. "We don't have lakes here in Scotland, only lochs."

"Sorry, sorry," apologised Henry, though he found the situation amusing and was half-laughing.

"Ahh, I'll make a true Scotsman of you yet," commented Andrew. "Come on, let's go the the lochside."

Andrew seemed keen to discuss business, largely because he didn't want anyone in the vicinity to get the wrong idea of two men walking together. As they wandered, Henry tried to look at his ordnance survey map, but it was a little windy, especially by the time they got to the shores of Loch Lomond.

"Do you think we can manage the agreed route and still get back to Edinburgh airport by two-thirty?" Henry asked as they sat by the lochside.

"Probably," said Andrew. "We still have nearly six hours left."

"From what I've seen of the map, the roads are all single carriageway from here on," muttered Henry.

"We'll be okay," said Andrew. "If we are running a bit late, we can always head towards Stirling instead of Perth. Besides, there aren't that many roads up this way, so I don't think we'll get lost."

"I don't know about you, but I'm beginning to feel a little too chilly," said Henry. "I'm going back to the car."

"Sit down man!" Andrew said to him. "It's only a breeze. It'll warm up as the sun gets beyond the hills."

Henry and Andrew sat looking into the loch and towards the local hills. Beyond, they could see the mountains in the distance. Though the scenery looked majestic, it was a little windy, so they decided not to stay too much longer, and headed back to the car. Andrew kept the keys and drove for a short distance, before stopping at a supermarket.

"You're not hungry already?" Henry asked him. "It's only just gone 9.30."

"I'm just going to purchase a few snacks and refreshments," said Andrew.

"I think you'll find very few shops on the route we're taking. Would you like anything at all?"

"A bag of crisps will be fine," said Henry, as he grabbed the road atlas to look at the route they would undertake.

Five minutes later, Andrew came back and went to open Henry's door.

"You don't mind taking over the driving?" he asked Henry as he passed him the keys to the car.

"No, not at all," replied Henry. "Is everything alright with the car?"

"Everything should be in order," Andrew reassured him. "I just fancy a bit of a rest, and a look at the scenery. I've got a few cans with me so it probably wouldn't be a good idea for me to continue driving."

"I take your point," acknowledged Henry, who got out of his seat and walked around to the other side of the car.

Henry then proceeded out of Balloch and onto the main highway, the A82. The road was only single carriageway, and ran mainly along the western side of Loch Lomond. As it continued, the road seemed to become smaller, as the views of the mountains ahead grew, larger and larger. The loch seemed to go on and on, becoming narrower and narrower, and steeper and steeper, until eventually the head of the loch was passed.

They headed over a low pass, after which Andrew told Henry to take the A85 several miles ahead. It was a while before Henry noticed a signpost for the A85, but when they eventually approached the junction, he took the

right-hand lane and headed towards Stirling. Andrew simply relaxed, drinking a can of lager, though he still monitored the fuel gauge every now and then. There seemed to be few road signs, and fewer junctions, which made Henry wonder if he was going in the right direction.

Approaching another junction, Henry saw a sign that the road ahead, the A84, led to Stirling, but the A85 turned left and led to Perth. He asked Andrew which road to take, though Andrew was, by this time, half-asleep. Henry drove into the small town of Lochearnhead, and found a place to park the car. He looked at the road atlas, and then at his watch. It seemed they had quite a bit of time on their hands, so decided to head for Perth. He noticed a small road on the south side of Loch Earn, which led back to the A85. He thought about turning back, and getting something to eat, but decided to take, what he thought was, the scenic route along the south of the loch.

When Henry noticed a small road to his left, he turned down it. After passing a small hamlet, however, the road seemed to get smaller still. Instead of looking at the loch as he was driving, he had to watch the road in front of him, where there was one bump after another. This eventually woke Andrew, who looked around him.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Oh, that's Loch Earn," replied Henry, as Andrew thought to himself for a while.

"Shouldn't we be on the other side of the loch?" queried Andrew, after which Henry explained what had happened.

Andrew grabbed the road atlas and took a careful look at it, as the car bumped along.

"I wouldn't have driven along this road myself, but I suppose one good thing will have come out of this," Andrew commented.

"Oh, what's that?" queried Henry, who was driving at 20 mph to try to keep the bumps to a minimum.

"It certainly will have tested the suspension of the car," said Andrew. "You don't mind if we stop at some point when we reach the A85, so we can have a look?"

"No, not all," replied Henry. "I could do with a bite to eat, too."

"That's settled then," agreed Andrew. "There's one slight snag, however."

"What's that?" asked Henry.

"We have to get there first," said Andrew. "At this rate, it may take a while."

When they eventually reached the A85, at St Fillans, it had gone 11.30.

They found a small road just outside the village, where they stopped to check on the car's suspension, for which everything seemed fine.

"Would you mind I drove for now?" Andrew asked.

"Are you sure you're okay to drive?" Henry queried. "You did have a sleep, not to mention a bit to drink."

"I'm okay," Andrew replied. "I only had one can of lager. I did have a bit of a rest, but I couldn't sleep, what with all that bumping about on that little road you took us along."

"Are we still alright for time to get to Edinburgh airport?" asked Henry after he looked at his watch.

"We should be okay," said Andrew, at which point he picked up the ignition keys from Henry.

"Do you want to turn back into the village, to get a bite to eat?" Andrew asked Henry. "We don't know where the next shop is."

"I noticed a few larger villages a little way ahead, on the atlas," said Henry. "We can stop there," at which point they got into the car and drove off.

They stopped at the next village, after which it was 'full steam ahead'. They reached the outskirts of Perth at about 12.45, and turned onto the A9, which led to the M90 and Edinburgh. Andrew seemed particularly excited. Once they had got beyond Perth, the traffic on the motorway began to reduce. At this point, Andrew began to press a little harder on the accelerator. Henry seemed unconcerned at first, but then looked closer at the speedometer, where he noticed the car travelling at 85 miles per hour. On the car went, 90, 95, 100 miles per hour.

"Are you testing the car for speed?" Henry asked.

"This car performs pretty well, don't you think?" said Andrew, as he pressed harder on the accelerator.

Henry was becoming concerned, as he saw the speedometre reach 110 miles per hour.

"I wouldn't go any faster, if I were you," he hinted to Andrew. "I haven't tried this car at these speeds."

"Have you any idea how fast this car can go?" Andrew asked him.

"I think this is fast enough," replied Henry, as the speedometre approached 115 mph.

"It feels alright to me," said Andrew.

"You don't want to go too fast – there may be police watching. We don't want to be stopped now – it may delay the journey and you may miss your flight."

“Okay, okay, okay,” moaned Andrew, as he lifted his right foot to let the car cruise along the motorway.

Unfortunately, Henry had unintentionally foreseen the future. Though the car was losing speed, it was still travelling way above the speed limit, and before long, they noticed a police car in the mirror, chasing them, blue lights flashing and siren wailing.

“Oh God!” shrieked Henry as he put his hand over his head. “I tried to tell you you were going too fast.”

“The car is slowing down,” said Andrew. “Besides, how do you know they’re chasing us?”

“I haven’t seen any other cars going over 100 miles per hour on the motorway, have you?!” exclaimed Henry.

“Relax, they may be called out to an emergency somewhere ahead,” suggested Andrew.

As they continued and turned into the middle lane, however, the police car followed them. It was clear that the police were chasing Henry and Andrew.

“Okay, okay,” said Andrew in a calm(-ish) voice. “Leave this to me.”

“I had intended to - it was you who drove the car at those extortionate speeds,” Henry told him, before a thought occurred to him.

“Look don’t worry,” insisted Andrew, as he drove the car into the left-hand lane. “I’m a councillor, remember. I’ve got a plane to catch. They won’t do anything.”

“On the other hand, perhaps I should speak to them,” suggested Henry. “What if they breathalise you?”

“I’ll be alright,” said Andrew. “I only had one can of lager. That’s not over the limit, and not enough to be arrested for.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Henry.

As Andrew continued to slow the car down, he pulled over to the left hand lane, and eventually, to the hard shoulder. The police car continued following their movements again. Eventually, the car came to a complete halt, as did police car. As a policeman got out and walked over to them, Andrew wound down his window.

“Good afternoon,” said Andrew. “How can I help you?”

“Can you confirm you’re name and address, please?” the policeman requested, as another policeman went along to other side of the car.

“Yes indeed,” said Andrew. “I’m councillor Andrew MacDonald, of 5 Clach Nah Beighan, of Lower Barva, on the Isle of Lewis.”

“Councillor, eh?” the policeman commented. “Was you driving at over 100

miles per hour?"

"I'm ever so sorry, but I have a plane to catch," said Andrew. "I don't drive at that sort of speed regularly."

"Well as a councillor, you should have known better than to drive at that speed at all!" the policeman told him. "It looks like you'll probably miss the flight anyway, by the time I've finished with you."

"I am sorry, sir, it won't happen again, I can promise you," Andrew pleaded to the policeman, as he showed him his driving licence.

"Hhmmm," mumbled the policeman. "I see you have no points currently on your licence."

"I don't drive at those speeds, sir," replied Andrew. "There are no motorways where I come from."

"Well that's as maybe," said the policeman, as he took a small plastic bag out of his jacket. "I'm afraid I'm going to ask you to step out of the car and to breathe into this bag."

Meanwhile, on the passenger's side of the car, another policeman was quizzing Henry. Henry spoke to the policeman politely, helping him with his inquiries, but felt he may have to use his 'force'.

"Thank you for your assistance, but can you step out of the car for a few moments, please?" the policeman asked him.

Henry stared at the policeman forcefully.

"I'm afraid that won't be necessary," he told the policeman, who simply smiled, and believed that Henry's statement had come from his superintendent via his intercom.

"Hey, Robbie, get me another breathaliser bag, will you?" the other policeman called to him as he saw his colleague walking back to their vehicle.

"Surely that won't be necessary?" Andrew queried. "You can see from the last test that my alcohol level is below the legal limit."

"While we're here on the motorway, sir, there's a lot of air blowing about," the policeman told Andrew. "I'd like you to take a second test, so we can be sure you are below the legal limit."

"I'm afraid that won't be necessary," Henry told the policeman, who seemed a bit harder to fool than his colleague.

The policeman waited a little while, after which Henry repeated his advice, to which the policeman thanked him and walked back to his vehicle. Andrew was astounded.

"How did you manage to do that?" Andrew asked him.

"Oh, I think he must have received a call from his local police station," said

Henry.

"Maybe, but usually, when someone tells a policeman that their request won't be necessary, you'll be nicked," Andrew confessed.

"Why, have you been nicked before?" Henry asked.

"No, no, I'm pleased to say," replied Andrew. "But I know a few people who've tried that sort of thing, and never got away with it."

"I'm sure you won't mind if I continue with the driving from here?" Henry then said to him. "I think it may be prudent if you stay in the back for the rest of the journey."

"That's fine," said Andrew as he threw the car keys to Henry. "I'll finish my other can of lager. Wake me up when we get to the Forth Road Bridge - I'll give you some money to pay for the toll."

After they got back into the car, Henry waited until the police vehicle had left the hard shoulder before driving off. They had an hour left to get to Edinburgh airport, though as Andrew only had a local flight to catch, he could afford to book-in a little later than usual.

It didn't take long to get to the airport. They arrived just before 2.30, at which point Henry woke up Andrew.

"Are we here already?" he yawned as he looked around him.

"It didn't take too long," Henry told him. "Shall I park in the short-stay car park?"

"You can stay here temporarily, if you like. I don't have much baggage to take with me," said Andrew, as he took out a pound of his pocket, which he gave to Henry for the Forth Road Bridge toll.

"What did you think of the car?" Henry asked.

"Good, good," replied Andrew, as he opened his door to stretch his legs.

"It was eco-friendly, the suspension's fine, and the ride was smooth, apart from that stretch beside Loch Earn. I can't promise you anything, but I will recommend it to my colleagues on the council at Stornoway."

Henry grinned as he got out of the car, and went to open the boot, from which Andrew collected his baggage. At that point, they shook hands and said farewell, before Henry got back into his car and left the airport, as Andrew headed for the departures lounge.

Henry stopped shortly after leaving Edinburgh behind, and contacted Ramondo to let him know he was okay and that everything went well. He then stopped at a couple of service stations on his way back to Ribbleshead Cottage, and fell asleep soon after he arrived home. Henry slept well that evening, and much of Sunday, too.

Henry now eagerly awaited the results on planning permission for his Atlantic Sea Turbine scheme. There had been a few meetings on the isle of Lewis, and the final consultation had been due the previous evening. Every time one of his staff came along to ask him something, Henry would get a little grouchy.

Henry was anxious to hear an update on the situation, but continued waiting. And waiting. At around midday, he thought about going out into town to get some lunch, but wanted to stay by the phone. He didn't want to miss such an important call. Then, Zebrina knocked on the door, to which Henry invited her in his office.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked apprehensively.

"Oh it's nothing really," said Zebrina, who could see he was anxious.

"Perhaps you could do something for me," Henry then suggested to her.

"Oh, certainly," she replied. "How can I help?"

"You wouldn't mind getting me some lunch, there's a good girl?" asked Henry, as he gave Zebrina a five pound note.

"What would you like?" Zebrina asked.

"Oh, anything will do," said Henry. "A sandwich or two would be fine. I'm not really fussed what variety, Beef, Ham, Chicken, Tuna or Salmon."

"Would that be all?" asked Zebrina, to which Henry thought to himself for a moment.

"You can get me a can of coke, too, please," he told her.

"I was going to get myself some lunch, too, so I might be about half an hour, is that alright?" Zebrina asked.

"Yes, yes, yes, that should be okay," replied Henry, before Zebrina left the office.

Henry sat on his chair, waiting for the all-important call. As he waited, he became even more anxious, and strutted up and down. While he was doing so, Ramondo knocked on the door.

"Come in, come in," said Henry.

"Are you okay?" Ramondo asked.

"Fed up and frustrated," sighed Henry.

"Still waiting for confirmation about planning permission on the Isle of Lewis?" asked Ramondo. "If you're that anxious, why don't you call the chap instead?"

"Andrew, you mean?" queried Henry. "I already tried about an hour ago. Apparently he wasn't available at the time."

"You may as well give him another call," Ramondo suggested to Henry.

"He's probably available by now."

"I know, I know," said Henry. "I don't want to call him too often, though."

"You're worried, aren't you?" Ramondo said to Henry. "If you're worried Andrew has bad news for you, it doesn't help to be so apprehensive."

"But I don't know if he has bad news," said Henry. "I just don't think it would be right to make the first move in this instance."

"I think you need a break," suggested Ramondo. "Andrew's got your mobile number, I suppose?"

Henry thought to himself for a moment. He'd forgotten to switch his mobile on that morning. Perhaps there were a few messages from Andrew on it. He quickly switched on his mobile, though there were no outstanding messages.

"Why don't you and get some lunch," Ramondo said to Henry.

"Zebrina's gone to get me something," replied Henry.

"Well why don't you get some fresh air, anyway?" Ramondo suggested.

"It's not good being couped-up in here all day."

"I know, I know," sighed Henry again.

"I'll tell you what," Ramondo said to him. "I'll wait here while you have a break. I should think you deserve one."

Henry wasn't sure, but decided to go out for a walk. He was getting rather couped-up in his office anyway. As he was about to walk out of the office, Ramondo reminded him to take his mobile, in case there were any urgent calls.

Henry wandered into town, until he met Zebrina coming the other way. They wandered off to the Leeds & Liverpool canal, where they had a little chat, before they walked back to the business premises.

"That was quick," Ramondo said to him when Henry went back into his office. "There weren't any calls from Andrew at Stornoway, by the way. Did you get any messages on your mobile?"

"No, I'm afraid not," sighed Henry, before telling Ramondo he went to the canal with Zebrina.

"Well I suppose you were too quick to get up to anything," commented Ramondo for a joke, though Henry didn't see the funny side of it.

"Okay, okay, I'll leave you to your own devices," Ramondo then said to him. "Besides, I could do with some lunch of my own. I'll see you when I get back."

As Henry ate his lunch, he heard the phone ring, and jumped towards it to pick it up. To his dismay, however, it was only Arthur, telling him about the previous evening at Frank's. Henry chatted to Arthur for a short while, but told him he was expecting a call.

Henry then finished his lunch, and waited. And waited. He wandered around the room again, but the longer he waited, the more anxious and frustrated he became. The phone went again a few more times, but it wasn't the call he had anticipated. Until, at about 3 o'clock that afternoon, Henry heard a strong Scottish accent on the line.

"Oh Andrew, I've been waiting for your call all day," Henry said to him. "It's not bad news I hope."

"No, no, no, you can rest assured," Andrew told him. "Planning permission for the turbine will go ahead."

Henry gave a sigh of relief.

"I did receive a call from you earlier today, but I was out the office on other matters," explained Andrew. "I only just arrived back a little while ago."

"Has the planning permission gone through, or do I have to submit the request formally?" queried Henry.

"We will act on your original request for the scheme," explained Andrew. "It may take a day or two before it's finally rubber-stamped, but I'll let you know when this is complete."

"Was there much opposition to the scheme?" asked Henry.

"There was a little more than anticipated last night," confirmed Andrew. "Overall however, the scheme was relatively favourable. We may have to be careful where the turbine is constructed."

"Oh, why's that?" asked Henry.

"Well, the biggest objections were from residents near to where we had originally intended to put the turbine," said Andrew.

"Oh, I see," said Henry. "Will this make a great deal of difference? I mean, are there many other places where we can put the turbine?"

"The latest proposals should be okay," Andrew told him. "We'll have to avoid moving it a little further south as a second option, should the current site proposed become unsuitable."

"So what's the problem?" asked Henry.

"I would have preferred to put the turbine near to the current electricity generator," said Andrew. "We may have to request planning permission to construct connections along the island, or for a new generator."

"Will that take long?" asked Henry.

"We may be able to get around those problems," Andrew suggested. "Have you decided what you're going to do about the scheme? It's too late to go into partnership with our current electricity suppliers."

"I'll get the turbine constructed myself," said Henry. "I've sorted out the

contractors and construction plans, but I think it would be best at this moment to run the whole thing from my business.”

“Give the electricity companies something to think about, eh?” commented Andrew.

“I won’t say my business will provide stiff competition just yet, but if all goes well, who knows what may happen in a few years time?” said Henry.

“Especially if the other turbine in Ireland goes ahead, too.”

“Oh yes, thanks for reminding me,” said Andrew. “I’ll have a look on the internet to see how that’s getting along.”

“What shall I do in the meantime?” asked Henry.

“I’ll let you know when the planning permission is all finalised,” said Andrew. “Why don’t we make an appointment for next week. Would Thursday be okay?”

“That’s fine,” said Henry. “I’ll stay over for a long weekend, if that’s alright by you. It’ll give me time to speak to the contractors about the project.”

“Okay then, I’ll see you next Thursday,” replied Andrew before putting the phone down.

At last, Henry was happy.

The Grand Opening

Spring was now fading, as summer approached. Everything seemed to be going well. Major motors were still selling at both showrooms. In fact, Lucas developed a new technique with old part-exchange motors. He took them to the warehouse at Slough in the evening, where, behind locked doors, he replicated them into a Major Motor, before driving the new vehicle back to the showroom the next morning. This reduced the necessity to rely on local car scrap yards, which seemed a good thing. Scrap cars could be used for replicating any future vehicles due to be sent to California.

Though Lucas wasn’t aware of it at the time, there would be no further requirement to send new solar vehicles to California. One morning, Henry received a call from Frank, inviting him to the grand opening of the CAC plant.

“That’s brilliant news,” said Henry. “What did you say was the precise date for the opening?”

“Two weeks from today, Monday, June 8th,” Frank told him. “Will you be coming along?”

"Probably," replied Henry. "I don't have any other major appointments in the near future, unless I get a call from Andrew at Stornoway, perhaps."

"Oh, how is that project going?" asked Frank.

"Not too bad, though we've had a few setbacks along the way," said Henry. "The project wasn't given a grant by the Scottish parliament, so I'm going to have to finance the project myself."

"I don't know if the banks will help much, but you should have a fair bit of money coming in, from what I've heard," said Frank. "I understand you've opened a second car showroom in London."

"On the outskirts, actually," Henry pointed out. "I've sent Lucas to run the place. It seems to be doing well."

"People are beginning to see the benefits of vehicles which don't rely on gas," Frank commented. "Have you thought about opening anymore?"

"I have viewed a few other sites, but I'm not sure this is really the right time to expand the business," Henry confessed.

"Oh, on the contrary," said Frank. "I think you need to strike while the iron's hot. The downturn in conventional motor sales doesn't mean that the whole market is on a downturn."

Henry wasn't too sure about Frank's comments, so said nothing.

"Sales of the vehicles you sent us are doing well," Frank added. "With the recent advertisement campaign from the Governor of California, we haven't many vehicles in stock at any of our showrooms, and everything else is on order."

"Congratulations," Henry then said to him. "Do you require any more vehicles from this side of the pond?"

"Probably not," said Frank. "We intend to start production as soon as the plant is ready."

"Do you have the necessary staff and management in place yet?" asked Henry.

"Yes thanks," said Frank. "Vehicle sales from the big three manufacturers here in the US have slumped. They've all been laying-off employees, which is why we've been able to appoint plenty of top, qualified staff for our business."

"Do you mean to say people have been coming all the way from Detroit to California?" queried Henry.

"Henry, I can vouch that people would jump at the opportunity to move residency to California," Frank laughed. "I should know - I'm one of them! Actually, you wouldn't mind doing me a small favour, would you?"

"What might that be?" asked Henry. "I thought you didn't require any more

vehicles in the meantime?”

“Thanks for the offer, but I think we may just about be okay for now,” said Frank. “Could you tell Professor Wagstaff about the opening – he’s invited too.”

“Yeah sure, that’s easy enough,” replied Henry. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“I’ve got a few other things to do, and some other managers I need to notify over here, so I’d be grateful if you could let Dermot know, too,” Frank asked him. “In the meantime, I’ll wish you all the best. ‘See you ‘round at the opening.”

Henry considered another showroom, and thought about ‘striking while the iron was hot’. He knew that was the best approach, and that Lucas and Ramondo were in favour of this, but wanted a second opinion (largely, to back his own cautious views that this was not the right time). He then remembered he was going to notify Arthur of the invitation, so decided to ask his opinion.

“Well, if the business is successful in a recession, this would be the best time to expand it,” Arthur told him. “Besides, I understood that you’ve agreed to Rico taking on local staff.”

“I know, I know, I did agree to his request,” acknowledged Henry. “That was on the condition that he releases Robinson & Frickas to me later this year. I’ll need them for the Atlantic project.”

“From what I understand, he’s already arranging interviews?” said Arthur. “I’ve looked at the books, and found that orders are increasing all the time.”

“Well as long as the money’s coming in,” said Henry. “Do you know how large the backlog of orders was?”

“I can’t say for certain, but it’s probably becoming too much for Rico and the team to handle on their own,” said Arthur. “How is that project of yours coming along, by the way?”

“To be honest, the project has had its ups and downs,” Henry confessed.

“A grant hasn’t been awarded towards it, and my lads are going to have to construct the infrastructure. All in all though, it’s still in progress.”

“Has planning permission been granted?”

“Yes thanks,” said Henry. “Apparently, Andrew, the local Planning Manager is sorting out the paperwork as we speak.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been able to trace the Irish council where that similar project is going ahead,” said Arthur. “Have you managed to find out anything at all?”

"Yes thanks, with Andrew's help," Henry acknowledged. "Apparently, the name of the council was in gaelic. He also managed to trace the energy company behind the project."

"So an energy company is behind the project after all," said Arthur with surprise. "I was led to believe it was the council's scheme."

"Never mind who's scheme it is," commented Henry. "As long as it's fruitful and helps this planet's eco system."

"That reminds me, I received a message far more interesting," Arthur then told him. "Professor Schmidt sent me an email from the 'Pilgrim.'"

"Oh, what did he have to say?" asked Henry.

"He only re-iterated about the small asteroids they were directing towards Mars," Arthur told him. "Didn't he copy you in?"

"I hadn't noticed anything from him, though I haven't looked at my messages from this morning yet," said Henry. "He probably isn't too keen on 'hearing' my thoughts about this, as I was opposed to his idea of directing comets at Mars in the first place."

"Indeed, indeed," recalled Arthur. "The idea is all in a good cause."

"I'm no professor, but I can't see how a couple of asteroid smashes will help develop Mars," commented Henry. "We now know that the surface consists of ferric oxide, which does not hold water."

"I know, I know," mumbled Arthur. "The idea behind the asteroids, though, is to give the planet a more organic surface."

"Are you sure that's feasible?" asked Henry. "Won't the asteroid smash create an explosion, followed by a blanket of dust covering the upper planet, and blocking out sunlight?"

"That's what would probably happen on Earth," explained Arthur. "Mars, however, has a very small atmosphere, so won't have the same effect."

"So what do you think will happen?" asked Henry.

"Well, I've been studying this on my own, and noticed that one asteroid has already smashed into Mars," confessed Arthur.

"So what was the result?" an inquisitive Henry demanded to know.

"It only occurred a few weeks ago, and hasn't had time to settle yet," Arthur told him. "Though there is little atmosphere on Mars, it is hoped that the debris will eventually be pulled down by the planet's gravity, and scatter all over the surface."

"I hope you've not informed anyone yet," Henry told him.

"I've not told Dermot or my colleagues, though how long this can be kept quiet for I don't know," said Arthur. "I've not heard anything from NASA yet."

"I suppose while President MacAraka is sorting out the Middle-East, there probably won't be much attention given to NASA," surmised Henry. "At least we know two of their top scientists are no longer there."

"I've not heard of any redundancies there recently," said Arthur. "Who are you referring to?"

"Professor Frank Marshall and Dr Steve di Pierri, of course," Henry pointed out.

"Oh yes, of course," giggled Arthur. "Silly me!"

"Do you ever hear from the Russians or Chinese?" asked Henry.

"I can't recall hearing from either of them, though we hear from NASA now and again," said Arthur.

"Well let's hope we don't hear anything more about this asteroid," said Henry.

"Oh, I think it's inevitable we will hear more of this in the future, I'm afraid," replied Arthur. "Professor Schmidt is intending to divert more asteroids towards Mars."

"Well if I receive any calls or messages from the 'Pilgrim about this, I'll pass them on to you," Henry told him. "I don't want to get involved at this moment in time – I have other things on my agenda."

One day the following week, while Arthur was checking some data on his PC in his office, a colleague put a call through to him. It wasn't from anyone that his colleague recognised.

"Hello, Professor Wagstaff of the European Space Agency, speaking – how can I help?" he said down the phone.

"Hi Professor," said a voice at the other end of the line. "My name's Robert Langman from NASA. I've received some data which I'd like to discuss with you."

"Oh, what might that be?" Arthur asked curiously.

"I've received reports from the International Space Station that an asteroid has hit Mars recently," Robert told him. "I was wondering if you were aware of this."

Arthur was a little unsure what to say.

"Have you received reports about this at all?" asked Robert.

"To be honest, I can't say that I have," replied Arthur. "Now that you mention it though, Mars did seem a little different the last time I observed it. Haven't you reported this to your manager?"

"I had reported this to my Astronomer-in-Chief, but as yet, he hasn't come back to me about it," said Robert.

"How very odd," said Arthur. "Did you say that an asteroid had smashed into the planet – that's probably why there was a hazy brownish-red tint over parts of the planet."

"The thing is, I reported it last week, and queried it again with Dr Ferguson," Robert told him. "I asked him again this morning, and he just said the matter was in hand."

"Well, it may be that in the current financial climate, there is little money around for major projects," suggested Arthur.

"Yes, but I only reported the case, not requested a new expedition to the planet!" said Robert. "Dr Ferguson may be more approachable than his predecessor, but I find he doesn't always come back with answers."

"Unlike his predecessor," queried Arthur.

"Professor Marshall wasn't always approachable, but he was decisive and you knew where you stood with him," Robert commented. "I've been observing Mars for the past two years, and noticed that a comet is due to smash into it next year, too. I think we may be entering a new phase."

"A new phase of what, may I ask?" queried Arthur.

"I think we may be entering a new phase of instability in our solar system," Robert suggested to him.

"Oh good lord, I hope not," said Arthur. "Are you saying you think there may be meteors heading for Earth which we don't know about?"

"We haven't detected any as yet, but my fear is that we may not find a meteor until it's too late," said a worried Robert. "As for that asteroid a couple of years ago, I found it very odd."

"Yes, it was a bit," said Arthur. "What do you suppose happened to it?"

"I'm not sure," Robert replied. "It travelled at colossal speeds."

"Yes, it did, didn't it," muttered Arthur.

"My guess is that it may have been part of a brown dwarf star," added Robert. "It may be that though the trillions of atoms were very fast, they never quite made it to light speed, to form a main star."

"Which was why the asteroid travelled at such colossal speeds, I suppose," said Arthur. "Do you think this caused the asteroid to be unstable?"

"I do indeed," said Robert. "I believe the atoms simply broke apart, and travelling at such speeds, seemed to disappear."

"And you believe this may have triggered a period of instability with the Kuiper and asteroid belts, which it passed on it's way towards Earth," surmised Arthur.

"That's just it," replied Robert. "I just wish someone, somewhere, would

take a look at these events, before it's too late."

"Hhmmm," Arthur muttered to himself. "Send the report to me – I'll see what I can come up with. I can't promise you anything, though."

"Thanks Professor Wagstaff, I'll be most grateful," said Robert. "Maybe, one day, a lot more people will be too."

"Indeed, indeed," said Arthur. "I'll try and get back to you next week."

Arthur, however, knew the true stories behind these events, but tried to think how best to approach the case. He didn't want to make a big thing out of it all, but at the same time, was concerned that word may get about and that some people may spread panic. Worse still, could it lead to cries of Doomsday and prophecies of Nostradamus? Arthur considered bringing this to Henry's attention, but thought better of it. He also considered informing Dermot, but decided to wait a few more days.

On Friday afternoon Arthur flew to Paris, where he stayed in a hotel for the night, before meeting Dermot at Charles de Gaulle airport the next morning. Arthur decided to wait until they were on their flight to California, before bringing the asteroid smash on Mars to his attention.

"Where did you find this out?" Dermot asked him.

"Well, to be honest, a chap from NASA told me he'd received a report about this from the international space station," said Arthur.

"When was this?" asked Dermot.

"He told me on Tuesday afternoon," said Arthur.

"What about the asteroid?" asked Dermot. "When did it smash into Mars?"

"Oh, about two weeks ago now," Arthur told him. "I believe it occurred on Thursday May 21st."

"Surely the chap informed his manager?" queried Dermot.

"Oh apparently he did," said Arthur. "He informed the Astronomer-in-Chief, Dr Ferguson, but wasn't too happy with the response."

"Oh, what was the response?" asked Dermot. "You can't expect even NASA to send a craft to Mars just because of some asteroid smash, especially in the current financial climate."

"Apparently, Dr Ferguson just said the matter was in hand," Arthur informed him. "The thing is, the chap was worried that we may be entering a period of asteroid instability."

"That sounds worrying," said Dermot. "Have you any evidence of this?"

"No, not really," replied Arthur. "However, don't forget, a comet smashed into Mars a few years ago. I understand another is currently heading for

Mars, too.”

“And there was that asteroid which came close to Earth,” Dermot added.

“I think that chap may have a point. What was his name by the way?”

“Robert Langman, I believe,” said Arthur.

“Leave it to me,” said Dermot. “I’ll try to speak to Dr Ferguson about this. I will admit though, he doesn’t exactly inspire confidence. I much preferred dealing with Frank.”

When Arthur and Dermot arrived at Sacramento airport, they went to collect their luggage, before heading straight to the nearest bar. As they waited there a short while, Henry arrived to meet them, before all three of them went off to have lunch. Henry had wanted to discuss the Aqua Turbine project in Ireland, but the main topic of discussion seemed to be the Martian asteroid. Though he tried to change the subject, by the time Steve arrived and joined in the debate, Henry decided not to bother. After all, he now had the web site he wanted and his own project was now in the pipeline, too.

Henry, Arthur and Dermot had all pre-booked into the Marriott Hotel in Sacramento, and after soothing their loins, were escorted there by Steve. The following day, Frank arrived at the Marriott to greet them, and after another drink or two, took them to his house. He introduced them to his wife, Jeanette, and to Steve, who was lodging with them. Amongst their discussions, Frank clarified arrangements for Monday morning, when they would all go, as shareholders, to the opening ceremony of the new car plant.

The three of them woke up relatively early the next morning, and by 8.30 had had breakfast. They then called a taxi, and proceeded together, before they were dropped off at the showroom, where they met Steve.

They had a brief chat with Steve, before he informed them that he wasn’t going to be involved in the ceremony. He took them through the back door, which led into the yard, where he pointed to where they should go.

As Henry, Arthur and Dermot walked down the yard, they saw a platform ahead, and as they went towards it, a man stepped onto it and looked towards them.

“I see you guys made it, then,” Frank said to them. “What took you so long?”

“We’re not late, are we?” asked Arthur. “I thought the ceremony wasn’t until 10.00 o’clock.”

“It isn’t, but we only have another 15 minutes to get everything ready,”

Frank replied. "You won't mind doing me a favour at all?"

"Of course not," said Dermot. "What favour might that be?"

"Can you open the gates," Frank requested, as he threw the keys to Dermot. "There's a notice outside about the ceremony. We don't want to keep the audience waiting."

Frank then turned to Arthur and Henry.

"You two can come with me," he told them. "There are a few more seats to be put onto the platform."

"Is everything ready?" asked Dermot, at which point Frank stopped and walked back to the microphone on the platform, which he tested, successfully.

"Everything's ready now," Frank told him.

"Where's the Governor of California?" Henry asked as Frank came over to him. "I thought he was supposed to be giving a speech?"

"He is," said Frank. "You can't expect the Governor of California to come and help with the preparations, though."

"How about Gary Armstrong and that Goldstein chap? Are they here, at all?" asked Arthur.

"Yes, they're here, talking in the reception with the Governor of California," Frank told him

There were seats in front of the platform, too. When Dermot got to the side gates, he tried each of the keys in the set, before eventually finding the right one. By the time he opened the first of the gates, the others were returning to the platform. When Dermot opened the other gate, he saw some people waiting outside the premises.

"Come in, come in," he said to them. "Take a seat. There are booklets which you may want to read, too."

As more and more people arrived, they each read the booklets, which were for CAC motors, and presented the vehicles available, along with possible future projects. Then, at 10.00 o'clock, the Governor of California took to the platform, along with Gary Armstrong and Mr Goldstein behind him, who went to sit with Frank and the others.

"Hello everyone, and thank you for coming along this morning to the grand opening of CAC Motors," announced the Governor'. "I'm pleased to announce that California is not shirking it's responsibilities. As you may know, I've introduced some measures to combat the threat of global warming, and I'm pleased to see that we are taking the matter seriously."

The Governor of California then stopped for a second to read the autocue.

"I'm pleased, too, to have the honour to open the new CAC Motors plant," he then told the audience. "I'm sure you've all seen the new advertisements for the vehicles. They will be the transport for the future, which operate on natural energy. No longer will we need to rely upon gasoline. No longer will we be caught in a price-war for the value of crude oil."

"The cars to be produced here sound very exciting," commented one member of the audience. "Can you elaborate on how these cars will operate?"

The Governor' turned around and looked at Frank.

"I shall leave that answer to my colleague here, a little later," The Governor' replied. "Perhaps I should first announce that the new plant for CAC Motors is now opened."

As the Governor' then cut a small yellow ribbon, the theme from Rocky could be heard from the loudspeakers nearby. He then pulled the cover of a plaque commemorating the event, as the audience applauded.

"I didn't know the Governor of California starred in Rocky?" Arthur asked Dermot quietly.

"He didn't," said Dermot.

"What? Not in any of the Rocky films?" Arthur queried.

"No, not one, as far as I can remember," Dermot whispered.

"Thank you, thank you, everyone," said a smiling Governor of California, before the applause died down and the theme from Rocky ended. "As promised, I will now hand you over to the Managing Director of CAC Motors, Professor Frank Marshall. He will help you with any questions you may have."

"Thank you, Governor," said Frank, as he came forward to the microphone to refer to the audience. "Can I help anyone?"

"These motors seem very exciting," a member of the audience asked again. "Can you elaborate on how they will run?"

"We are about to embark on the production of solar-energy vehicles," explained Frank. "This means that they will harness energy from the sun (something we tend to get a lot of here in California!)"

"How will the energy be harnessed?" the same man asked.

"I was just coming to that," Frank replied. "Solar energy is absorbed into the sun roof. The energy is stored here, and then transferred to the engine to replace the initial combustion and run the pistons, and so forth. I could elaborate further, but I'm sure you get the picture."

"Will these cars run even when the sun isn't shining?" asked another

member of the audience.

"I'm pleased to say that we considered the possible problems prior to production," replied Frank. "In addition to the main Solar Energy Battery, there is a similar auxiliary battery, which will absorb the energy when the main battery is full. This energy can then be utilised when the sun is not high in the sky."

"How many miles can these cars do on one full battery of solar energy?" another person asked.

"That would depend upon the size of the engine," said Frank. "There are details in the booklets we've placed on the seats prior to the opening. If you require any further details, our staff in the showroom on the main road will be only too happy to help."

"Is there a point when the batteries can absorb no further energy?" was the next question raised.

"There may be a point, if the vehicles are standing stationary on the road, but don't forget that whenever the car is in motion energy is always being utilised, hence further energy can be absorbed," Frank replied.

"These vehicles may be suited to California, but if I wanted to visit my family in New York, for instance, full sunshine cannot be guaranteed," another person stated.

"That may be the case at the moment, but we intend to develop solar energy stations, in a similar way to gasoline stations," explained Frank.

"Where will these solar energy stations be located?" asked another member of the audience. "One in each state? One in each city?"

"Eventually, it is intended for these stations to be located all over the country," said Frank. "We intend to first place them in highway service stations."

"Do you really think you can achieve all this, and if so, how long?" another person asked.

"I believe it is possible," said Frank. "I wonder how many people queried with JFK all those years ago, whether we could get a man on the moon."

"Professor Frank Marshall," someone then queried. "Weren't you once employed by NASA?"

"Yes, indeed I was a couple of years ago," Frank replied.

"Do you believe we have the technology available to achieve all these new vehicles and energy stations?" the person then asked.

"You should never under-estimate the American people," Frank insisted. "I don't claim to be the new messiah, or the new Bill Gates, even, but what I do know is that this is the beginning of a new revolution."

"I presume by that you believe we do have the technology?" the same person queried.

"The technology is available, and has been for sometime," Frank commented. "What is required is a new vision in which to utilise the technology."

"Is this plant totally new, or have the other CAC motors on sale in the showroom, been assembled here?" asked another of the audience.

"I can confirm that this plant is totally new," said Frank. "The motors which have been sold in the showroom were constructed elsewhere. After assessing the suitability and potential of the motors, it was decided to construct this manufacturing plant for the assembly of further vehicle production."

"The booklet suggests you have plans for other models, and with different forms of energy," was the next question raised. "Can you elaborate on this?"

"It is intended to develop vehicles with alternate forms of energy," Frank confirmed. "In fact, we had put some on sale a few months ago, but they didn't seem to sell as well as the solar cars on show."

"Which vehicles were these?" asked another person.

"Digital cars have been produced, and are in use in the UK," explained Frank. "We intend to develop similar vehicles in the future, which may be more suited to other parts of the United States. However, at this moment in time we intend to focus on the current models."

"You seem pretty confident that this will become a big success," another man commented. "How can you be sure this won't just fall by the wayside?"

"Well, let me tell you something," said Frank. "I'm generally a cautious kind of guy. I won't make the final decision on something until the full situation has been assessed. On that note, and upon all the evidence my staff and colleagues have uncovered, I feel sure that this will be the next big revolution."

"Have you taken into account the current financial climate?" the previous person asked.

"Developments such as the one here today require a great deal of planning," admitted Frank. "This whole project was planned a year ago, at a time when the markets were by no means healthy. Though admittedly, they weren't as bad as they may seem now, they may equally be in better shape in the next year."

"But would you have gone ahead with this project if you had been aware

of the current financial climate?" the man asked.

"That is a matter for conjecture," replied Frank. "I should add that various people acknowledged this project and were prepared to back it financially. It is thanks to them that this project has now taken off and has the potential to develop further. I must emphasise that man will never get anywhere if he simply stands still."

To that, Frank received a round of applause.

"I've bought one of your motors, and have had no trouble so far, I'm pleased to say," a man in the crowd stated. "However, if there were any problems, can I take it here to be repaired?"

"Certainly," Frank emphasised. "You will be covered by a warranty anyway, but if any parts of the vehicle need changing for any reason, my staff will only be too obliged to help."

"You mentioned digital motors a little earlier, did you not?" another man queried. "Do you have any in stock which I could look at?"

"There may be one or two somewhere abouts, but if you could speak to my staff in the showroom, they may be able to confirm this," said Frank.

"If there aren't any available, we could order some from the UK, though at this point in time that may depend upon the amount of interest for the vehicle."

At that point, the crowd seemed to go quiet for a few seconds.

"While I'm here, is anyone else interested in a digital motor?" Frank asked the crowd, to which a few people raised their hands. "Can I ask you to check out the availability in the showroom, please."

Frank looked around the crowd for a moment or two, awaiting the next question. This didn't arrive, so he asked them if anyone had any further queries, before re-emphasising the green credentials of the vehicles and that they would revolutionise travel. Upon no further questions, he briefly referred to Henry, in case he had anything further to add, which he didn't, before Frank thanked the audience for attending and declaring the ceremony complete.

A brass band then came from behind the platform, and led Frank, Henry and some of the audience along to the showroom, to view the cars on sale, while Arthur and Dermot took some of the seats into the reception as the crowd disbanded. There were some managers in reception, who then came out and helped to dis-assemble the platform and bring the other seats into the meeting room, as there was to be a meeting that afternoon.

There were a number of inquiries that lunchtime, which Frank, Henry and

Steve helped with. By 1.30 that afternoon though, Frank invited Steve and Henry to the second meeting. This time, in the main meeting room of the building, were some managers and engineers. They each introduced themselves, as did the shareholders.

"The first item I wish to raise is how this morning's inspection of the plant and it's facilities and machinery went?" Frank asked the engineers.

"Everything seemed fine and in good working order," one of them replied.

"Can you confirm that you intend for the new company recruits to commence on the machinery tomorrow morning?"

"If everything is in good working order," said Frank, before he looked across at the other members at the meeting. All of them seemed to acknowledge that everything was okay.

"Will the new recruits receive training?" a manager asked. "We can't expect to send them onto the shop floor immediately?"

"I know one or two of you had attended some interviews along with Steve and myself, and we believe some of our new recruits may already be adequately trained in the machinery," Frank stated. "You will be aware that those I am referring to will have transferred to this plant having gained previous experience with one or other of the major US motor manufacturers."

"Will there be any further training?" asked another engineer.

"A training course has been set up for all recruits unfamiliar with the machinery," Frank announced. "One of my engineers, Bob Steinberg, will be leading the course. If you believe at any time that some of the recruits require further training, please bring this to the attention of Mr Steinberg."

"Where will the training be held?" asked a manager.

"Training will be held in a small corner of the plant for the time being, away from the main working area," said Frank. "Training premises are in the pipeline, but we first wish to clarify which items are needed for training purposes."

With no further queries regarding training, Frank then referred to the stock controller. "Mr Jones, do we have all the necessary materials, implements and stationery in stock?" he asked.

"I have checked the stock against the list of items you gave me, and can confirm that everything is in order," Mr Jones replied.

"Good, good," said Frank, before he looked around again. "Before we go any further, does anyone have any queries with stock, or are there any items which need to be added to previous orders?"

There were no queries to Frank's question, suggesting that all implements

and materials were in stock.

"I've looked at the sales figures you have provided on the agenda, which seem solid when bearing in mind the current financial situation," commented one manager. "Can you confirm where you took these figures from?"

"The sales figures are from the local showroom, together with a few other showrooms we have in California," said Frank. "The motors were designed by one of my colleagues, Henry, and constructed elsewhere. After assessing the suitability and potential of the motors, it was decided to manufacture further vehicles."

"I noticed that you have ideas for other vehicles in the pipeline," asked an engineer. "Do you have any idea when, and if, they will come on the production line?"

"I'm sure you will appreciate that this is dependant upon the current financial situation and until this improves, I can't confirm any dates or timelines being considered at this moment," iterated Frank. "What I can confirm is that we do intend to produce other ecological vehicles at some point in the future."

"Do you intend to commence production tomorrow?" asked a manager.

"We intend to commence production in the next month," Frank replied. "I cannot give any firm dates as this will be dependant upon how successful the workforce is and how much training is needed."

"The workforce statistics don't seem to be too large?" the HR manager queried.

"We will not be producing vehicles to anything like the same extent as the major motor manufacturers, not for the time being at least," said Frank.

"We do intend to develop the business, but that is dependant on other factors at the moment."

"How strong are CAC motors financially?" asked the previous manager.

"Some of us have moved states to take up work here, so I'm sure you will acknowledge that it won't go down well if this company goes under after six months."

"I note your concerns, but can confirm that we have strong financial backing," replied Frank.

"Can you confirm who these strong financial backers may be?" the manager asked.

"I am not in a position to announce who is backing the company, but I can confirm we will not go under in six months, nor a year," said Frank.

At that point, there was a little discussion and speculation between

managers.

"I don't claim to be the new Bill Gates, but I know this is the beginning of a new revolution," Frank then pointed out. "We have a new leader in this country, a leader who is not prepared to shirk responsibilities, and who, allied with the Governor of California, will see that ecological vehicles are here to stay."

At that point, everyone at the meeting looked towards Frank, and after Steve started to clap him, followed by Henry, everyone else began to give him an ovation.

"Thank you, thank you very much," Frank said to everyone, before the clapping died down. "However," he added, "this is not just the culmination of a big idea. This is the beginning of a new future for the US, for Europe, and for the world."

Another handclap followed. Perhaps the personnel at the table warmed more to Frank's statement, or perhaps they just decided to go along with his enthusiasm. Either way, he received another round of applause. Indeed, Frank was very enthusiastic and positive throughout the meeting, and helped to alleviate any scepticism. He made the personnel feel that CAC motors would be going places, but never tried to convince them that it would be easy.

Frank let Henry elaborate on the vehicles during the meeting. In fact, Frank wanted to talk to him about becoming his number two at CAC Motors. Henry had his own business to run, however, and had arranged to leave the next day. Arthur and Dermot, on the other hand, had decided to stay a little longer, and went to Frank's house for a drink the following evening.

"So, how are things coming along at the European Space Agency these days?" Frank asked.

"Oh, not too bad," said Arthur. "Things are a bit quiet at the moment."

"Would either of you like something to drink?" Frank asked, to which Dermot requested a whisky. "How about you, Arthur, would you like anything to drink?"

"I'll have pepsi, please," asked Arthur. "You know me, I'm not one for anything too bitter."

"I notice that some other astronomers have cottoned-on to your idea of how to find Earth-sized planets," Frank said to him. "Do you have anything planned for the near future?"

"We're in collaboration with NASA about missions to orbit the Jovian satellites and Titan," said Dermot. "We're also proposing a mission to

study dark matter in the universe.”

“And one to study black holes to gain a better understanding of how they affect galaxies, don’t forget,” added Arthur. “That was suggested by me, largely on my views about the cosmos which I explained at the Astronomers convention last year. “

“Are either of you going to this year’s convention?” asked Steve, who had just walked into the room.

“Not this year,” Dermot told him. “We decided to let some of our other members attend this time.”

“Where is it, by the way?” asked Frank.

“This year’s convention will be in Abu Dhabi,” Dermot told him. “Actually, I believe Arthur was invited, but decided to turn down the offer, isn’t that right?”

“I enjoyed it all last year, but decided I had other objectives this time,” said Arthur. “I’m currently compiling a report on black holes and illustrating my theory.”

“Accept my apologies, but could you remind me of your theory again?” Frank requested. “I’ve had so much else going on over the past twelve months, I haven’t really had time to study my old profession.”

“I believe that the Big Bang was caused by a super-mega black hole, something probably too large to comprehend,” said Arthur. “The forces of several mega black holes will, rather than merging into one even larger black hole, eventually tear each other apart and cause a massive explosion, i.e. the Big Bang.”

“How do you make that out?” asked Steve.

“There must be a maximum stability point for black holes, just like there is for stars,” Arthur told him. “Man cannot comprehend this because it is so large a phenomenon, and is millions of times more rare than things we consider to be rarities, such as supernovae or mass extinctions.”

“Besides, I doubt anyone will be alive to see such a phenomenon,” added Dermot. “We’ll all be bits of stardust, crushed to infinity somewhere in the black hole.”

“I see Arthur’s got you hooked onto his theory,” Frank said to Dermot.

“Well, to be honest, this matter-annihilating-anti-matter theory in millionths of a second does take a lot to be believed,” Dermot admitted. “That theory was produced to explain background radiation and how galaxies are currently moving away from each other, but could something happen in such a short time?”

“Do you think that the super-mega black hole theory is more plausible?”

asked Frank.

"Well it explains the Big Bang and how so much matter can be created," replied Dermot. "The other theory seems to suggest something is created out of nothing, just a big bang."

Just then, the phone rang.

"Hello, Professor Frank Marshall speaking, can I help you at all?" said Frank as he picked up the phone.

"Hi Frank, it's Clint here," was the reply from the other end of the line. "I was just ringing to ask how your business is doing on it's first few days?"

"Oh, everything's gone smoothly so far," Frank told him. "It's a bit too early to ascertain any more just yet, though. The Governor of California opened the plant, and we had a few more of our shareholders attend, too. As a matter of fact, I've got a couple of them with me tonight."

"Perhaps I should speak to you later," Clint suggested. "I don't want to interrupt any shareholders party of yours."

"Oh don't worry," said Frank. "It's only Dermot and Arthur. You remember them don't you – we met them at the Astronomers convention last year."

"Yeah, I remember the two of them," said Clint. "The Irish guy from the European Space Agency, and his buddy from outer space."

For a moment, Frank thought to himself.

"Are you okay Frank?" asked Clint down the other end.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm okay," replied Frank. "You know, until you mentioned that, I'd totally forgotten about it."

"About what?" queried Clint.

"That Arthur came from outer space," admitted Frank. "Perhaps it's because I've had so much else to think about these past twelve months."

Arthur heard the phone conversation, but decided to say nothing. Unfortunately, Steve and Dermot overheard the conversation, too. Steve began to ask Dermot about Arthur.

"You certainly have been a busy man this past year," Clint said to Frank, back on the phone. "I don't suppose you find much time to think about the stars these days."

"Believe me, Clint, I don't find the time to look at the stars, these days," said Frank.

"Don't you talk to Steve about astronomy at all?" asked Clint. "He still lives with you, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, Steve's still here," Frank told him. "He's with us at the moment, too. He's been very busy too, travelling to San Francisco, LA and San Diego, and compiling our stats. He's managed to persuade his misses to

move to California, too."

"Oh, good for him," said Clint. "On that note, I think I'll let you all get on and have a good old chat about the cosmos."

"You don't have to go just yet," Frank commented. "Would you like to have a word with one of my colleagues?"

"Thanks, but I can't stay too long on the phone," said Clint. "Say hello to the others for me, I'll speak to you again soon."

As Frank went over to the others, he could see Steve was intrigued with Arthur.

"Hey guys, that was Clint on the phone," Frank then said to catch their attention. "He says hi to you all."

"Oh that's nice of him," commented Arthur, trying to change the subject.

"How is he by the way?"

"Oh he sounds fine," said Frank. "Between us though, I think this recession is beginning to affect him."

"Oh? How's that?" asked Dermot. "I thought he was retired."

"He is, he is," Frank told him. "The thing is, Clint's pension is tied to the stock market. Many companies can't maintain their outgoing pension payments. One or two have even folded."

"Well blow me down!" said Dermot.

"I recall Frank and Clint telling me you were from outer space," Steve then said to Arthur.

"I may not have been born here, but I'm just as human as you or anyone else in this room," Arthur replied. "My ancestors were from this planet."

"So what happened to them?" Steve asked him.

"They decided to flee the planet when they detected a large asteroid approaching," Arthur told him.

"Do you know how long ago that was?" Steve asked. "It wasn't about 50,000 years ago, was it?"

"No, no, no," replied Arthur. "It was a lot longer than that. Millions of years before, even."

Steve wouldn't give up and kept referring to some earlier extinctions. Arthur kept shaking his head until eventually Steve mentioned the major Cretaceous mass extinction, 65 million years ago. Arthur said nothing.

"Your ancestors left the Earth at the KT mass extinction, didn't they?" queried Steve. "But how did they survive in a world ruled by the dinosaurs?"

"I don't really know, but what I have deduced is that they probably lived in what is now Antarctica," said Arthur. "It wasn't quite at the South pole, but

near enough for much of it to have a similar frozen environment to that of today.”

“But we’ve never discovered any human remains dating back that far?” said an astounded Steve.

“That’s probably because there haven’t been many archeological expeditions there,” said Arthur. “In addition, the remains would be well beneath the current ice, if they haven’t already been compressed to form limestone or other compounds.”

“Do you know where they went after that?” asked Steve.

“No, not really,” said Arthur. “I would surmise they possibly settled on the Moon, or more probably Mars, after leaving Earth.”

“Do you know where they went after that?” asked Steve.

“I simply don’t know,” Arthur replied.

“Say, did you come here on that asteroid which disappeared last year?” Steve then asked Arthur.

Arthur simply acknowledged.

“Gee,” sighed Steve. “Your ancestors must have developed some form of high-speed travel across the galaxy. That was travelling at millions of miles per hour. It was no normal asteroid.”

“That is correct,” Arthur then replied. “We had developed nuclear fusion, similar to the processes of stars.”

“So how fast could you travel?” asked Steve.

“I believe we could travel at up to 600 million miles per hour,” said Arthur.

“Wowwww!” exclaimed Steve. “It seems odd that with all that travelling, and in all that time you’ve hardly changed from the people of today.”

“That may have something to do with the fact that we lived in a small environment,” replied Arthur. “Besides, there probably hasn’t been as many generations as you may think.”

Steve was becoming even more mystified and ever-curious.

“You must have heard of the Twin’s Paradox?” Arthur queried with him, to which Steve nodded in acknowledgement. “You will then realise that, were people to travel at light speed, they would not age at all?”

“Are you saying that because you’re ancestors travelled at near-light speed, they hardly aged?” asked Steve.

“Basically, yes,” said Arthur, but decided to say no more.

“I’m sorry if I sound curious, but you don’t exactly hear about people from outer space every day. I’ll bet that’s why you discovered other small Earth-sized planets elsewhere in the galaxy?” Steve then surmised.

“I knew where to look if that’s what you’re referring to, but I still had to

develop a new technique of how to find such planets,” Arthur pointed out. “Hey, Frank, didn’t you say you wanted to make an unofficial announcement tonight?” asked Arthur, in an effort to change the subject, at which point Frank looked at Steve.

“Didn’t you say you were moving to California?” Frank asked him, before saying anymore.

“Is that right?” Dermot asked Steve, before Frank could get a word in edgeways. “I wouldn’t mind moving here myself. You should be guaranteed plenty of sunshine.”

“Well, to be honest, we had a fair bit of sunshine at my old home in Houston,” Steve commented. “I won’t miss the hurricane season, though.”

“Will your family be moving here too?” asked Arthur.

“My wife, Laura, managed to get a teaching job in San Francisco, so she’ll be moving with me,” confirmed Steve. “Our eldest child will be going to Harvard after the summer.”

“How about your younger daughter?” Dermot asked. “Will she be coming?”

“We didn’t think it was the best time to change her education,” said Steve.

“She’ll be staying with my sister-in-law over the next few years. We’ll make sure we get to visit them every once in a while.”

Frank then coughed for a second to draw everyone’s attention.

“I can now confirm that Steve will be our marketing manager,” he then told the others. “He’s been around the state, assessing possible sales potentials, without much of which, we couldn’t have got this off the ground.”

“Thanks, Frank,” said a beaming Steve. “I don’t now what else to say.”

“Oh it’s okay. You deserved it,” Frank replied, before turning around. “Say, Dermot, have you managed to keep up to date with that Atlantic turbine in Ireland?”

“Apparently, the latest I’ve heard is that construction is due to commence sometime soon, if it hasn’t already started,” said Dermot.

“Hey, didn’t Henry have something similar under review?” queried Steve.

“Yes he did,” said Arthur. “That’s probably why he’s gone back home early.”

“Do you know when it’s due?” asked Dermot.

“Henry was telling me that planning permission has now been finalised,” replied Arthur. “He thinks construction should start in September, and that the project will be ready by October, or so he’s been led to believe.”

“Whereabouts is that scheme of his?” asked Steve.

“On the Isle of Lewis, to the north west of the tip of Scotland,” explained Arthur.

“Gee, I wouldn’t like to be there when this turbine is constructed,” said Steve. “I’ve heard it gets pretty chilly up there.”

“And windy, too,” Arthur added. “In hindsight, it’s probably the best location for the scheme.”

The Final Hurdle

Henry had a lot on, which was why he cut short his trip to California. The journeys there and back had tired him out, though he still went to his Skipton office on Wednesday June 10th, as there were imminent issues. When he went to check the mail on his PC, he noticed he had received a lot of messages while he’d been away. There were messages from Rico, Arthur and Frank, and one from Andrew, saying that the contractors for the turbine were beginning to query when the turbine would be ready.

Then he noticed a message from another familiar person – Commander Ondichi - suggesting to visit Earth again, to carry out further reconnaissance. Henry thought this would be handy to get some help for his Atlantic project. The infrastructure still had to be completed, in time for the contractors to assemble the following month. As Henry read further, he noticed that The Commander asked Henry if he’d like another member in his team on Earth. Henry didn’t object to this at first, but the reasons for this became a little clearer when he contacted the Commander.

“Has someone requested to join us here on Earth?” he asked the Commander. “I could do with a few extra pair of hands, particularly with that Atlantic turbine project I mentioned.”

“Oh, yes, I remember you telling me,” said the Commander. “Is it coming along well?”

“It will do, when I get some more help,” Henry told him. “We found a suitable location for it, planning permission has been granted, and arrangements have been made for contractors to construct the turbine.”

“When is it due to be constructed?” asked Commander Ondichi.

“Next month,” said Henry. “We just need to assemble the turbine and supporting infrastructure, before it can be constructed. The problem is most of the team I took here have moved on. The project is too big for just a few of us, even with replicators.”

“I see,” said the Commander. “And you’d like some of my men to come and help you assemble the turbine?”

"If it's possible," said Henry. "I'd be most grateful. It may even be the start of a new revolution on Earth."

"I'll see what I can come up with, and let you know later," the Commander told him. "That other person who wanted to come to Earth won't really be up to the task."

"Oh, why's that?" asked Henry.

"It's Doctor Gammazeta," the Commander confessed. "She's not really in the best shape to assemble large and heavy items. She's pregnant."

"Pregnant!" exclaimed Henry. "Shouldn't she remain on the 'Pilgrim, in that case?"

"Well, she claims that the father isn't from the 'Pilgrim," said the Commander.

"But who could be the father?" queried Henry, before he began to work out what may have happened while they went to visit London in April.

"What are you going to do?" the Commander asked him.

"I don't know just yet," said Henry. "I'll speak to Ramondo, and let you know later."

When Henry found a suitable moment, he went to speak privately with Ramondo about Doctor Gammazeta. Ramondo was as surprised as Henry, and unsure what to say at first, though he didn't deny an earlier affair.

"Are you absolutely certain she's pregnant?" Ramondo asked Henry, as if seeking a way out of the mess.

"Commander Ondichi seems pretty certain," Henry told him. "Did you ever let her out of your sights for any length of time while she was here?"

"No, she was with me all the time, apart from when she had a shower or went to the lavatory, of course," replied Ramondo.

"You don't deny sleeping with her?" Henry queried.

"No," Ramondo replied after considering what to say for a few moments.

"She never told me she was fertile, though."

"Why, wouldn't you have 'obliged' her otherwise?" asked Henry. "Anyway, more to the point, I don't suppose you object to Doctor Gammazeta staying with us?"

"No, not at all," he replied.

"Well, I can't say I really know the lady, but I did tell you she had a certain reputation," Henry told him.

"I accept that," said Ramondo. "I noticed a few hints after picking her up. I think she must have gained that since we left the Interstellar Pilgrim. She

always seemed okay to me when we were there.”

“She seemed okay to me too,” agreed Henry.

“Perhaps she’s been looking for someone to settle down with, and never found the right man?” suggested Ramondo.

“Perhaps,” considered Henry. “How about Zebrina - do you still love her?”

“I don’t know if I really do love her any longer,” confessed Ramondo.

“Since you invited me back to Ribblehead, we seem to have drifted apart.”

“You’re not blaming me for that, I hope?” asked Henry. “You still go to the warehouse at Skipton, and see Zebrina most days.”

“I know, I know,” admitted Ramondo. “We don’t really have a sexual relationship anymore, though.”

“Sexual relationship?” queried Henry. “There’s more to life than just sex.”

“I know, I know,” Ramondo acknowledged. “Besides, she has another partner at Skipton – Richard Copeland.”

“And why should she show any affections to Richard Copeland?” questioned Henry.

“He saved her from that cave she got lost in, not long after we’d arrived here,” said Ramondo. “Doctor Gammazeta has shown me things I had never known before. Experiences I had never had with Zebrina.”

“That’s quite enough,” Henry said abruptly. “I don’t want to know the bare details, thank you. I don’t object to having another member with us, or even two for that matter. My main concerns are, if she’s going to stay with us, to give her a recognised identity, and everything which goes with it.”

“Like give her a first name and register her with local authorities, you mean?” queried Ramondo. “We could register her as a migrant from eastern Europe, set up a foreign passport.”

“Possibly, but let’s see what transpires first,” said Henry.

Later that day, Henry contacted Commander Ondichi to inform him that Ramondo had admitted to the possible implications of Doctor Gammazeta, but suggested that he didn’t think it was all down to Ramondo.

“I accept what you’re saying,” the Commander said to Henry. “Doctor Gammazeta has been known to be a loose lady, though she has been rather quieter since returning from Earth.”

“Do you think she knew what she was getting up to?” asked Henry.

“Possibly,” replied the Commander. “It could also be because she has felt ‘under the weather’, as people say on Earth. I don’t mind her returning to Earth again, but I’ll only agree to this if it’s agreeable to you.”

"I'm prepared to agree to this, if you can arrange to send me down some men to replicate that turbine I was telling you about," Henry said to him.

"That's fine," replied the Commander. "I've already spoken to four lads, who are pretty useful with replicators. Will that be enough?"

"Probably," said Henry. "If you come, too, that will leave seven of us, so I can leave Lucas back in London. Doctor Gammazeta can look after Ribblehead Cottage while we're away. Do you know when will be the earliest you can come?"

"We can come in the next hundred Earth hours, if you like?" the Commander suggested.

"I think we'd best leave it until Sunday night," said Henry. "This is summer now, and the fells around here can get quite busy. The pot holes are often busy at weekends, including Meregill. I'll look for another suitable pot hole where you can land."

Henry and Ramondo visited several possible landing sites for the new Large Reconnaissance Craft, over the next few days. It was decided that Rowten Pot, on the fells the other side of Ingleton, may be the best location to land. It was not too far away from the hamlet of Masongill, where a road ran past and up towards the fell known as Gragareth. The pot hole was less than half way up the fell. Though it was a little further to drive to the pot hole, it was only about half hour away.

On Sunday night, Henry went to collect the equipment with Ramondo, before he contacted Commander Ondichi, to confirm they were coming to collect them. As they drove to Rowten Pot, Ramondo couldn't help but recall his earlier occurrences with Doctor Gammazeta. Surely there was more to her than her reputation, he thought? She was a Doctor, after all, which must have meant she had spent plenty of time studying. Perhaps she wasn't really a tart, just a misunderstood female who wanted to catch up with events she may have missed during her younger years - events which had now caught up with her.

After passing through the hamlet of Masongill, they noticed a sharp speck of light for brief second. They then drove their cars up to the end of the road leading up the hill. They parked at the end of the road, before taking the equipment up the hill to Rowten Pot. When they arrived at the pot hole, they relaxed for a while before preparing the equipment.

"Is everything alright up there?" Commander Ondichi asked from his mobile at the bottom of Rowten Pot.

"Everything's fine," said Ramondo. "Is Doctor Gammazeta with you?"

Would you mind if I spoke to her?" at which point the Commander passed his mobile to the Doctor.

"Hello, Ramondo, how are you?" she asked him.

"I'm alright – what about you?" asked Ramondo. "Is it true what I've been told, that you're pregnant?"

"It's true," she told him. "You're not upset, are you?"

"No, not really," said Ramondo. "A little surprised, perhaps, particularly at what else I heard."

"That you're the father?" she queried. "That's true as well. That's why I've decided to come to Earth."

At that point Henry took the mobile from Ramondo.

"Can you hand me back to Commander Ondichi?" Henry requested, before confirming everything was ready for the pick-up.

The whole job had to be done quicker than on the last occasion. There were more of them due to be pulled up this time, so it was agreed to start immediately. The Commander came up first, followed by Zelcius. Next came Doctor Gammazeta, who quickly ran over to Ramondo, and hugged him. They had a brief chat with each other, before Henry sent him over to help the Commander pull Philpin and Crabtree up the pot hole, who were each rather large.

"Has Doctor Gammazeta been working you too hard?" Philpin asked, grinning at Ramondo, to which he was totally embarrassed and said nothing. "She has, hasn't she?" he said as he noticed the embarrassment on Ramondo's face.

Ramondo wanted to get up and thump Philpin, but he knew it wouldn't be a wise move at this point.

"Don't worry yourself, she's had most of us," said Philpin. "Doctor Gammazeta's not that bad, really. She just can't keep her emotions to herself. It happens to everyone from time to time."

Ramondo simply sighed, and walked over to the Doctor. He really felt something earlier, something special, something he had never felt with Zebrina. Surely this counted for something, and wasn't just another 'notch in her crotch'. He didn't want to show his emotions in front of the others, though.

The final member to be raised to the surface was Adhera, which was just before 4 am, and when the sun began to rise in the morning sky. Henry and Ramondo then drove them all back to Ribblehead Cottage, where they all rested for a few hours.

It was noticeable that day, how pleased Ramondo and Doctor

Gammazeta were to see each other. Though he had tried to forget her, this meeting, and the prospects of seeing a little Ramondo by the new year, had brought them closer than ever. This wouldn't be for too long, however, as he was due to go along with Henry and the others to assemble the turbine.

At six o'clock on the next morning (Tuesday) that Henry woke Commander Ondichi.

"Are we due to leave already?" asked the Commander, as he placed his arm over his head while the sun shone through the window.

"In a couple of hours," Henry told him. "I've booked seven flights to Stornoway. The thing is, we need to get to Glasgow Airport to catch the flight."

"Where is Stornoway?" asked the Commander. "Will it take long to get there?"

"It's the main town of a group of islands to the north west of Scotland," explained Henry. "It's where my Atlantic project, you know, that turbine I told you about, is going to be constructed."

"And how far is Glasgow Airport?" asked the Commander.

"A few hundred miles or so," said Henry. "It won't take long to get there, by the time we've reached the M6 – it's all motorway from there on."

Henry then awoke the others, after which they all had a large breakfast. By seven-thirty, they left in a large seven-seater family-saloon, bound for Glasgow Airport. Though it was rush-hour, once they were on the M6, the journey was relatively easy, and by 11am, they had checked-in. They each had a drink and bite to eat, before heading for the local flight.

That afternoon, at Stornoway airport, Henry rang Doctor Gammazeta, back at Ribblehead Cottage to check if everything was okay. He was becoming concerned whether he should have left someone behind to watch over her. The Doctor told him all was well, and when he was satisfied, Henry went to pick up a car, to drive his team to the site where the turbine would be installed. He also hired a truck, which may be required for the project.

"It's rather empty here," Commander Ondichi commented when he first saw where the work was to be carried out.

"That's the advantage about this," said Henry. "There may be land we can use to replicate the turbine. Do you think there are enough of us to carry out all the work?"

“Probably, though there does seem to be more work to be done than I may have first imagined,” the Commander replied. “The lads I’ve brought along are rather useful with replicators, and they’re pretty strong, too. Do you want us to start the job now?”

“I don’t think it’s worth starting now,” said Henry. “We’ve got a replicator for each of us, so we can work on different things at the same time, tomorrow. I’ve booked a return flight for us on Thursday afternoon, so we need to get as much done tomorrow as possible.”

“Can you put the flight back 24 hours, if necessary?” asked the Commander.

“We should be able to, for a local flight to Glasgow,” said Henry. “I’ll see how things are tomorrow lunchtime. If necessary, I’ll re-book the return flight. Come on, let’s go back to Stornoway, and book ourselves a hotel for a couple of nights.”

The following day (Wednesday) was busy. Much of the infrastructure was too large to replicate in one go. Instead, they constructed them in pieces until the afternoon, after which most items were assembled into larger pieces.

It wasn’t until the following lunchtime (Thursday) that their preparation was completed. Henry then drove them all back to Stornoway, where he visited Andrew. Commander Ondichi contacted Doctor Gammazeta while he and the others stayed in a pub in Stornoway.

Henry and Andrew then went to see the contractors they had arranged to carry out the final construction of the project. They took the contractors’ manager to the site to show him the infrastructure and gave him a plan of the project and directives on their final construction.

Henry had booked a return flight to Glasgow for 17.30 that afternoon, a flight which he and the others made with thirty minutes to spare. Though the flight wasn’t long, they were delayed as they went through the customs at Glasgow airport, where Henry had to use his force to ensure Commander Ondichi and his men got through.

By the time they arrived back at Ribbleshead Cottage, Doctor Gammazeta was asleep in Ramondo’s double bed. Fortunately, she had earlier prepared the beds for the others, so they could fall asleep after they arrived home.

They all slept well the next morning, even through the sounds of the birds whistling outside, though the 7.14 train from Ribbleshead to Leeds

disturbed Ramondo. As he awoke, Doctor Gammazeta entered the bedroom, carrying a tray with breakfast and a cup of coffee for each of them.

"You shouldn't be doing this for me, not in your condition," Ramondo told her.

"Whyever not?" she asked. "I'm only three months pregnant."

"Are you aware that a full pregnancy on Earth takes nine months?" he then asked her. "You're already a third of the way there."

"I realise that it takes a lot quicker than on the Interstellar Pilgrim," she replied. "I'm not showing yet, though."

"Well, take it easy," Ramondo instructed her. "You haven't shown any signs of morning sickness, have you?"

"Not yet," she told him, as she got into bed. "Don't worry," she then said as Ramondo looked at her, "I'm not going to ask you to do anything. Well, not for a while, anyway!"

Ramondo smiled and kissed her.

"I was waiting up for you last night," she then told him. "What time did you arrive home in the end?"

"About half-past-eleven, thirty minutes before midnight," he told her.

"You look knackered," Doctor Gammazeta then commented to Ramondo.

"I'm not too bad now, though I did feel knackered when we finally arrived home last night," he said.

"I suppose you all had a lot of work to complete?" she queried.

"There was a lot to put together," he replied. "To be honest, it may have been better if we'd have fully completed the work ourselves. Mind you, I suppose we know now, that if any big jobs need doing, we can call on the Commander and his men."

"I wouldn't take that for granted," she said to him. "We don't really know how long they'll stay in the solar system."

"Well, maybe once we've got this turbine working, this country can see the benefits of using wave energy," said Ramondo. "We may no longer need the Commander's men. The United Kingdom is surrounded by sea, so we ought to be in the best position to utilise it."

"One thing which did occur to me when I was on the 'Pilgrim, is that though life may be longer when you're travelling across the cosmos at near-light speed, is that life is a lot slower," she told him. "I happened to log on to Earth's internet, and read about time dilation."

"So you think life will be better here?" he asked her.

"Oh definitely," she replied. "I know there are different places on the

planet, and not all are as developed as things are here, but now I've seen Earth for myself, it just makes me feel cramped in a compartment in the Interstellar Pilgrim."

"Well, I know Henry and the Commander have always been keen on settling down somewhere," said Ramondo. "Perhaps they've found the right place to settle."

"Does the Commander intend to stay here?" asked Doctor Gammazeta.

"I don't really know," said Ramondo. "Talking to him in the car last night, I got the impression that he's impressed with Henry, and wouldn't mind doing something similar."

"What, settling on Earth and developing new technology?" she queried.

"Something like that, but when the time is right," he said.

"Do you think now is the right time for him?" she asked.

"Probably," said Ramondo. "Unfortunately, he has a lot more to sort out on the Interstellar Pilgrim, first. Professor Schmidt wants to create a more-organic Mars in which to settle on, but that's going to take millennia. Then there's Major Kong – I don't think he'd fancy helping him settle on Earth."

The others all took their time awaking that morning, before having a late breakfast. Henry then offered to take them on a round of the Yorkshire Dales, stopping off here and there as they visited sites such as Malham Cove and Goredale Scar. Henry then took them to his Skipton premises, where he introduced them to Zebrina. He also took them into the showroom to see his motors. They acknowledged Richard Copeland, who was with a customer at the time, though Henry then led them back to his car before Richard could ask who the guests were and where they came from.

Henry then took them through Wharfedale, where they saw Kilnsey Crag, and stopped to have tea and scones at Kettlewell. It was noticeable that they all enjoyed the trip, Commander Ondichi in particular, though they knew this was the end of their current expedition to Earth. When they arrived back at Ribbleshead Cottage, Zelcius, Philpin, Crabtree and Adhera went with Ramondo to the Ribbleshead Inn, while the Commander went to sit on a chair in the garden.

"Do you have a lot on your mind?" Henry asked him as he stared at Ingleborough, beyond the Settle to Carlisle railway line.

"Just pondering," he replied, to which Henry queried what about. "I would like to settle down here, one day. Just relaxing, looking at the hills. Have you ever been up any of them?"

"Once or twice," said Henry. "There's a race around these parts every year, called the Three Peaks Run. That includes going up that large hill you're looking at, Ingleborough, plus a couple of others, Whernside, behind you, and Pen-y-Ghent, over to your left."

"Have you taken part in the race at all?" the Commander asked.

"No, it's too exhausting for me," commented Henry. "I prefer to walk up them slowly, to admire the scenery all around. In actual fact, these peaks are classified as mountains."

"I thought mountains were immensely large, covered in snow and very hard to climb?" the Commander queried.

"Yes, that is the correct definition of a mountain," said Henry. "We do get snow up here during the winter, so I suppose they're little mountains."

"Oh for the easy life," muttered Commander Ondichi.

"Don't get me wrong, but life here isn't that easy," said Henry. "This country, and most of the planet, are in a financial crisis at the moment. Balancing life and commitments isn't as easy as it sometimes seems."

"You're managing to cope quite successfully through this crisis," the Commander emphasised to Henry.

"But I'm from another generation, another environment if not another world, with totally new ideas," said Henry.

"Well perhaps this planet isn't as intelligent as it's sometimes cracked-up to be," the Commander commented. "Perhaps it needs more people like you to develop new ideas."

"I shouldn't say this, but these ideas are still at an early stage," Henry reminded him. "Some projects have been taken up, but they have yet to come to fruition. I probably wouldn't have been able to get everything done without replicators."

"Like those digital cars, you mean?" queried the Commander. "Didn't you say something about solar-powered cars being produced elsewhere on Earth? They were your idea, weren't they?"

"Yes they were," Henry acknowledged, as he thought to himself. "I suppose my team and I have done some things to help this planet. They just need to be accepted by mainstream society."

"Do you think that will happen?" asked the Commander.

"I don't know," said Henry. "I hope so, but just at this moment, I can't say with any real certainty. That's why, if things go wrong, I may consider coming back to the Interstellar Pilgrim, and moving on elsewhere."

"We won't be going far - only to the asteroid belt - or at least not for a while," Commander Ondichi told him. "I'll monitor events here on Earth,

and keep in regular contact with you.”

“I presume you have been monitoring Earth regularly?” Henry then queried with him.

“Not as often as I’d like,” said Commander Ondichi. “We’re currently monitoring Mars to a greater degree, to watch out for any asteroid smashes. Professor Schmidt is convinced we can create life there instead.”

“And how does he prophesise to do that?” asked Henry.

“He says that if we bombard Mars with organic asteroids, we can make Mars a more-organic planet,” explained the Commander. “Eventually, when the dust has settled, trees and flora may be grown, which will absorb much of the carbon-dioxide which the planet will have gained following the bombardment.”

“And the trees and flora will give out oxygen,” said Henry.

“That’s the idea,” confirmed the Commander.

“But that won’t happen overnight,” Henry pointed out. “That will take many lifetimes, thousands of years, if not millions.”

“I know, I know,” sighed the Commander. “Professor Schmidt thinks we should then go whizzing around the cosmos at near-light speed, as it will prolong our lives.”

“It’s a nice idea, especially for future generations, but it’s impractical for us,” Henry commented. “As Commander, you should put your foot down, emphasise that this should only be a project and not the main course of action. You should use your influence.”

“I don’t think it carries a lot of weight any longer, I’m afraid,” the Commander admitted. “The council tend to follow Profesor Schmidt these days, and I’ve had to deal with a possible mutiny, led by Major Kong.”

“Is ‘Kong still locked away, now?” asked Henry. “Has he reconsidered his actions, and prepared to forget his warrior’s conscience?”

“For the time being,” said the Commander. “We’ve released him from confinement, on condition that he renounces his views on war and conquest in the cosmos. He’s not a bad leader, in truth, just a warrior at heart.”

“I think you may be getting soft in your older age,” commented Henry.

“You may be right,” the Commander acknowledged. “I don’t now if I really want to command the Interstellar Pilgrim anymore. I’ve seen Earth, I’ve seen how you and your team have settled down here, and I’d like to do the same.”

“Well, if you feel that way about things, you can always come and stay

with me,” said Henry. “I’m sure we can sort something out for you.”

“The problem is who would I leave in charge of the ‘Pilgrim, though?” asked the Commander. “I can’t let Kong assume responsibility, or let Professor Schmidt lead the rest of the crew on a wild goose chase.”

“Well it’s up to you,” suggested Henry. “There are plenty of places on Earth in which you can settle. With a small team and a number of replicators, you could develop your own business. First of all though, you must assess where you’re going to land and settle. Different countries have different risks attached.”

Henry and Commander Ondichi continued their discussions as they had a few bites to eat and the odd drink or two, until the sun went down. By that time everyone was preparing to return to the Interstellar Pilgrim. Before they left, though, Commander Ondichi then turned to Doctor Gammazeta.

“We’ve a lot to thank you for, since assuming Doctor Stardust’s role, and we may all miss you on the Interstellar Pilgrim, if you choose to remain on Earth,” he said to her, before shaking her hand. “We haven’t gone far, in astronomical terms, and now we have established contact, feel free to keep in touch.”

“I will, Commander, I will,” she told him, before the Commander turned to Henry. “I’m ready when you are. Shall we get going?”

When Doctor Gammazeta had fully dried her eyes, she followed the Commander outside the house. As he and his team got into Henry’s car, she waved them off.

When they arrived at the pot hole, they didn’t take long to set up the equipment, and one by one, the Commander and his team were lowered towards the Large Reconnaissance Craft. The Commander was last to descend, and shook hands with Henry and Ramondo before checking he had everything prepared for his own descent.

By 3am on Saturday morning, the Commander told Ramondo that his team were preparing for departure, after which Ramondo and Henry pulled the winch up before putting away the equipment. When they had reached safety behind a stone wall nearby, Henry contacted the Commander and gave him the all-clear. A minute later, a quick flash seemed to go by in the dark of the night, to signify that the LRC had now left. It was now time for Henry and Ramondo to return.

Henry and Ramondo now had the weekend to relax, before they went back to Skipton. They also had Doctor Gammazeta to help them, for the time being at least. Over the next few days, it was decided to register her

as a migrant from Lithuania, and she was trained to talk with an appropriate accent. She was also given the name Maria, and it was intended to sign her for a veterinary course in the new year, after she had recovered from giving birth to Ramondo's child.

On Monday, Henry received a call from Andrew on Stornoway.

"I see everything's ready now," he told Henry. "I must say, you cut it a bit fine, though."

"I thought the contractors weren't due to start the work until a few weeks time?" Henry queried.

"Yes, but the contractors needed to visit the site, look at the infrastructure on hand and assess what plant and machinery they may need to carry out the work," Andrew told him.

"Oh, I hadn't thought about that," said Henry. "I have been rather busy these past few weeks."

"Have you been up to much?" asked Andrew with interest.

"Well, you know that car plant in California that I was telling you about," Henry told him. "I was invited to the opening ceremony a couple of weeks ago."

"How did it go?" asked Andrew.

"Oh, like most things in America, with pomp and ceremony," said Henry.

"The Governor of California was there to open the ceremony. They also had a meeting with managers and inspectors in the afternoon."

"I wouldn't mind being in California right now," said Andrew.

"Don't get me wrong, it's a nice place to be, but I'm quite happy here in wildest Yorkshire," Henry said to him. "If only the weather could be as reliable!"

"I think you should count yourself lucky!" exclaimed Andrew, with half a giggle. "We get the worst of the weather here in the Hebrides. We're further west than you are, so any storms reach us first, plus we're further north, so it's always colder. Gales, storms, snow – you name it, we've had it."

"It's never been too bad when I've been to Stornoway, but I'll take your word for it," said Henry.

"Okay then," said Andrew. "Anyway, can I make an appointment for a couple of weeks time, Wednesday July 8th, perhaps? We can sort out any last-minute problems before the work on the turbine will commence the following Monday. If you're feeling confident with everything, you could come along on Friday 10th, and stay for the weekend."

"Either date is fine by me at the moment," said Henry. "I'll have a word

with my assistant, and come back to you later today.”

Henry was basically bluffing, but informed Ramondo that he would be going to Stornoway on the earlier date suggested, and asked him to visit Leeds, to view a possible car showroom. Though the markets appeared to be over the worst, and sales of the digital cars were picking, this was rather slowly. After the success of the showroom at Rayners Lane, it seemed this may be the perfect time in which to open a similar showroom in a major city.

While Ramondo was visiting Leeds, and indeed Bradford too, Henry remained in his Skipton office, preparing for the turbine, for which construction was due to commence in the next few weeks. He was now eager, counting each day as it went by, until he flew to Stornoway.

He took his final plans with him on the flight, and on arrival at Stornoway, was met by Andrew. The two of them went to have lunch and a drink or two, before discussing the final plans. Andrew then took Henry to meet the chief contractor, and to discuss matters. A hard-hat was issued to Henry, and he and Andrew were each issued with a badge, to give them the authority to proceed onto the construction site.

The following Monday morning, they visited the construction site, which was now being set up. A large path was being created by the trudge of lorries proceeding from the main road to the cliffs. A crane was already in place and helping to move a portacabin on the site. Amid further lorries coming and going, it was decided to leave the site for the time being.

It wasn't too far from the site to Stornoway, though the roads weren't good which made progress slower. When Henry and Andrew returned that afternoon, and noticed the site was still being prepared, they decided to call it a day.

Henry was keen to view the progress on the turbine, so they returned to the site on Tuesday afternoon. Henry was a little disappointed, though when they returned there the following afternoon, it seemed as though the construction was finally ready to commence.

Henry had booked a return flight to Glasgow airport for Thursday, so took the telephone number for the construction site, for the foreman and for the contractors', home with him. Andrew would monitor the construction and send photographs to Henry which he would capture on his mobile.

When Henry returned to Ribbleshead Cottage by tea time, Doctor Gammazeta had prepared some food for him. Soon afterwards, Ramondo returned home from Skipton, and after they had each eaten, briefly

showed him pictures of several possible showroom sites in Leeds, Bradford and the surrounding area.

Henry was still tired, so they had a closer look at the possible sites for a new showroom the following day. Henry was rather keen on some out-of-town sites, particularly a couple near the M1 and M62 though Ramondo had also included some vacant sites nearer to the city centres of Leeds and Bradford. They discussed the possibilities over the weekend and on Monday went to visit the sites concerned, and made inquiries about the premises at the respective agents.

By Tuesday, they had whittled down the possibilities to three main sites, after which they checked with the local councils regarding rent and other charges involved, and by the end of the week they had selected a large store between Morley and Birstall, situated near to the junction between the M62 and M621.

"Shall I put out an advertisement for car salespersons?" Ramondo asked Henry as they drove through Bradford that afternoon. "I can place an advert on the internet – there are quite a few sites where jobs can be searched for."

"Wait until we've received the final sale details, first," suggested Henry. "I was considering sending you there, at least initially."

"I can't handle everything on my own," replied Ramondo.

"Well we do have another person who can assist you," said Henry. "Mind you, she may not be in the best condition for dealing with retail matters."

"Now we've registered her as Maria Gammazeta from Lithuania, shouldn't we send her to the nearest clinic to get checked-over regularly?" suggested Ramondo.

"I suppose we should," muttered Henry. "Do you know where the nearest health clinic is, to Ribblesdale?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest," said Ramondo. "I haven't noticed one at Horton-in Ribblesdale. Perhaps there's a clinic at Ingleton or Hawes. I'll have a look on the internet this evening."

"You do that," advised Henry. "We'll have to start making plans for her soon. Which reminds me – do you intend to get married?"

"Zebrina has taken it alright, so perhaps we should start thinking about it now," said Ramondo. "We haven't made any plans yet, but, I'll speak to her tonight."

"You do that," Henry said again, before reconsidering an earlier suggestion. "On second thoughts, perhaps we'd better put out an advert for salespersons at the new showroom. When this is all up and running, I

shall have to leave you to sort out your arrangements, and I can get on with checking on the Atlantic turbine project.”

When they arrived back at Ribblehead Cottage, Ramondo spoke to Maria Gammazeta about his concerns.

“Aren’t you going to deliver our child?” she asked him.

“I know babies are often delivered by their parents on the Interstellar Pilgrim, but wouldn’t it be better to go and relax in one of those maternity hospitals?” Ramondo said to her.

“You can’t really relax when you’re having a baby,” she told him. “Well, I can’t at least. Besides, I’ve already searched the internet for local maternity units. I tried telling you that the other night, but you were too engrossed in that new showroom you were looking out for.”

“Oh,” Ramondo replied. “I must have forgotten.”

“There are no maternity units nearby, not even at Skipton,” she told him.

“Surely there must be some units this side of Bradford?” said a worried Ramondo. “Is there nothing nearer?”

“There are hospitals at Kendal, Keighley and Clitheroe,” said Maria. “I don’t know if they have maternity units, though. Would you like me to give them a ring tomorrow, or shall I try Blackburn or Lancaster? They should have maternity units.”

“I think we should register you with the local GP, first,” suggested Ramondo. “We’ll see what they advise, before we make our next move. If we can get you into anti-natal classes, perhaps I’ll come along. Hopefully, they will prepare me for any home deliveries. Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Over the next few days, Ramondo began to prepare an advertisement for two car salespersons for the new showroom, but his thoughts wandered towards Maria and their baby. At midday on Wednesday he drove back to Ribblehead Cottage to pick up Maria, before taking her to their appointment with the local GP in Ingleton, that afternoon. The GP stated that there were no anti-natal classes locally, but that there were some at Kendal or Lancaster. Neither were ideal and were about 25 miles away, but at least one was available, with another to fall back on should they be turned down at their first choice. After careful considerations they chose the ant-natal classes at Kendal, if possible, and to register with the paediatrician there.

Henry, meanwhile, had other concerns, and phoned Andrew regularly to check how the turbine was coming along. He almost forgot his

appointment at the estate agents to pay the deposit on the new showroom near Leeds. By the end of the week, though, the showroom belonged to his business, so the following week, he and Ramondo would go there and prepare the premises.

By this time, the advertisement for the two salespersons had been placed online. By the following week, however, when Ramondo and Henry looked online at the applications, they were surprised at just how many they had received. Neither had sorted or sifted the applications, as they had other concerns, and it took them a full day to scale down the most suitable applications, and another day to select a handful to interview. Henry wanted to get everything up and running as soon as possible, as his main concern was the turbine, so the interviews were held the following week. From the interviews, two former car salespersons were selected.

Over the next few days, Ramondo delivered some cars from Skipton to the new showroom at Leeds, and the following week, guided the new salespersons around the premises and introduced the vehicles to them, demonstrating their performance and economy. He showed them the sales targets, and promised them each a digital car if the targets were met at the end of the next 6 months, and by the end of July, the new showroom was fully up and running, as were the sales of the vehicles.

Ramondo could now concentrate on his personal job, looking after Maria. Together, they went to the anti-natal classes at Kendal, as Maria's body was now becoming noticeably larger.

Henry, on the other hand, was always chasing up Andrew about the Atlantic turbine project of his. He visited Andrew in August to check over the project himself, which was now beginning to take shape, though perhaps not as quickly as Henry had hoped.

Henry, and Ramondo too, had originally intended to take a few weeks away over the summer, but other matters took priority. Andrew continued to send pictures from the site, which seemed to show everything coming along fine, until finally, in early September, Henry had a call from Andrew confirming the project had now been completed.

"Do you know when the turbine will start providing energy?" Henry asked rather excitedly.

"The turbine has to be fully tested out, first of all, before we can start utilising it," Andrew told him. "We've got some specialist electrical technicians to check everything is correctly connected and adapted, right at the moment."

“Do you know when that will be finished?” asked Henry.

“I can’t say for certain, as it depends if the electrical technicians find anything out of place,” replied Andrew. “It may be ready later this week, if all is well. I’m going there this afternoon – I’ll let you know how things are.”

“I’ve checked on the internet about the Irish turbine recently,” Henry then told him. “Apparently, that’s already up and running.”

“Well, it was due to be completed several weeks before this one,” said Andrew. “Have you spoken to the project manager over there?”

“No, not yet,” said Henry. “I’ve had a few other matters to deal with myself, recently, and maybe for a few more months yet.”

“I’ve been meaning to invite the chap over here sometime, but haven’t been able to for one reason or another,” admitted Andrew. “Why don’t I invite him next week – you can come along too.”

“Okay,” said Henry. “Let me know how things are this afternoon, and perhaps we can arrange something for next week.”

Later that day, Andrew went to visit the site of the turbine. Most of the cabling inspections had been passed by the local Health & Safety Inspector, with a few more which remained to be checked over. He rang Henry that afternoon to give him the positive news, after which they arranged to meet the following Monday. Andrew also invited Brendan O’Hagan, Project Manager for the turbine which had recently been constructed off the south west coast of Ireland.

When Henry arrived at Stornoway airport on Monday afternoon, Andrew greeted him and confirmed that the remaining inspections had been given the all clear. He also confirmed that Brendan O’Hagan would be coming along later in the week, but that he could only attend on Thursday.

“I wasn’t going to stay too long, but I suppose I may as well make a week of it here,” said Henry. “I’m due to take a vacation anyway, so I may as well make the most of it while the sun’s shining.”

“You do that,” Andrew said to him. “It’s been rather hot here recently - certainly a lot hotter than it was the past two years.”

“You don’t think the hotels will be over-booked, do you?” asked Henry.

“I shouldn’t think so,” replied Andrew. “You should find a spare room or two at one of the local hotels here. Besides, I should have thought the hotel you’ve booked to stay at should fit you in for a few extra days. I mean, you’ve become a regular visitor to Stornoway.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Henry. “I could take a few trips out at sea to visit some of the other islands, too.”

"That's a good idea," agreed Andrew. "Anyway, shall we get going, I can show you the new turbine."

"Is everything ready now?" Henry asked keenly.

"The final inspection for the cables and connections has been passed," Andrew informed him. "Tests on the turbine and generator can now be carried out."

Andrew drove Henry to the site at the Butt of Lewis, where they noticed the plant and machinery were being removed from the site. They went over to the foreman, who showed them around the site and updated them on the current inspections. Henry could see his plan coming to fruition, as the turbine lay horizontally in the sea, held by two large arms jutting out from the cliffs. He noticed how the turbine spun whenever waves came roaring in from the sea.

"When will the tests be carried out on the turbine?" Henry asked.

"We're sending our electrical technicians here on Wednesday," said Andrew. "That should give the contractors enough time to clear the site."

"Am I right in assuming that the turbine is already at work?" Henry then asked.

"Ai, I suppose it is," replied Andrew. "It's not generating any electricity just yet, but while the turbine is spinning, it's absorbing energy which will be stored in the generator. That way we can safely assume that there will be sufficient energy available for the tests to be carried out on Wednesday."

"Good, good," said a cheerful Henry. "I'll take a trip around the island tomorrow, then. Is there a lot to see around here?"

"Well, Harris has now been designated an area of natural beauty," Andrew pointed out. "It's a bit more hilly than Lewis, if you fancy going up a peak or two."

"That's settled then," said Henry. "I suppose you've got other things on tomorrow?"

"Ai, I have," acknowledged Andrew. "Let me know how you get on – we'll have to have a day out somewhere, sometime. I rather liked our trip around central Scotland a few months ago."

"Oh yes, that reminded me, how are those digital motors I sold you, coming along?" asked Henry.

"Fine, fine," said Andrew. "We came in one today, or hadn't you noticed?"

"To be honest, I had my mind on other things, but I suppose I should have noticed, none the same," admitted Henry. "I'm glad everything's going well – perhaps we can show the car to Brendan when he comes on Thursday."

“Who knows, they may develop similar motors in Ireland?” suggested Andrew.

They then wandered around the site for a short while, before Andrew drove them back to Stornoway, where Henry booked into his hotel, and arranged to stay a few extra days.

All was quiet the next morning, as Henry awoke. After breakfast, he walked around town, though it wasn't until after 9 o'clock that the shops opened. Henry went to hire himself a car for the day. Before setting out, he went to the local supermarket at Stornoway to buy a few sandwiches, drinks and chocolates to take with him.

When he left, he found that though most roads were classified as A roads, they were hardly in good condition. The views however, more than compensated, and made the journey towards Harris more enjoyable.

Henry noticed that the environment was broader and hillier than on the north of the island, at Lewis, and in some ways resembled his own adopted Yorkshire dales. As in Yorkshire, he found the conditions rather blustery, perfect conditions to power sea turbines, if not to walk about in. Henry just relaxed in his car, drank and ate a little, until the wind died down outside, when he decided to go for a stroll on the hills. When he reached the top of one of them, he could see the Atlantic ocean before him. However, he couldn't see where his car was. He was pretty sure where he had left it, though, and considered walking down the next valley. He found that these hills had few clear paths he could follow, and before he became lost, decided to head back for his car.

By the end of the day, Henry had taken several pictures with his mobile, and drove back over the north coast of Harris and Lewis.

On Wednesday morning, Henry went to visit Andrew, who had received a report about the turbine from the Health & Safety Inspector. Everything seemed positive, though there was a query against the turbine's surge protector. The two of them discussed the matter, and after Andrew had sorted out his mail, went with Henry to the turbine. Today would be the turbine's first testing, to examine if there were any flaws left in the system. When they arrived at the site, Electrical technicians were checking everything over. When everything was okay, they switched on the turbine, which was lowered into the sea, and began turning. Though it spun slowly at first, its speed increased as further waves came in. Henry and Andrew sat and discussed the turbine with the electrical technicians, and every ten

minutes, one of them went to the sub-station to check the power. When it was felt there was sufficient energy in the system, they switched on the small substation behind the cliffs. Henry's dream was now turning into reality.

They continued to check the sub-station at regular intervals, and when they were all satisfied that it was absorbing energy sufficiently, Andrew offered to treat them all to a meal in the pub at Port Nis, a few miles away.

While they were in the pub, the weather began to turn for the worse. As the clouds closed in, they noticed lightning in the distance and could hear thunder. They drank a few more pints, waiting for the weather to improve. When they eventually realised that the weather wasn't going to improve substantially, they decided to go back to the sub-station, as it hadn't been checked over for the past three hours.

When they arrived there however, they noticed that everything had stopped. Had it switched-off automatically? Henry was pretty sure it hadn't, as he never devised the turbine to do this. Andrew then looked at the Health & Safety report, which he had printed off and took with him. He read the query about the surge protector in more detail, before asking the others whether there may have been a strong surge while they were away. After all, there had been lightning and gusts while they ate their lunch in the pub.

They all agreed that this could have been a possibility, after which the electrical technicians then looked into the sub-station a little closer. They noticed that there had been a short circuit. Could this have been caused by a powerful surge of energy?

After further checks on the sub-station and the turbine, it was concluded that a powerful surge probably did cause short circuiting. Henry felt a little embarrassed, but Andrew told him that it was for things like this why the turbine had to be tested first. Besides, he didn't think it would be a problem getting hold of a strong surge protector. Andrew asked the electrical technicians what they thought would be best at this moment. It was then agreed to repair the circuits of the original surge protector, re-install it and take a closer look at it. In the meantime, Andrew and Henry would go back to the council offices at Stornoway.

Henry was a little concerned particularly as Brendan O'Hagan, who had planned and managed the similar project in Ireland, was due the following day. When he eventually got back to his hotel room, he took out his laptop and looked at the Irish project. He noticed that the surge protector

installed was much larger than the one he had originally set up, and so copied it into his laptop. He also checked to see what protectors were available on the internet. When he found a large, industrial surge protector, he copied that, too. He then took a closer look at the images, assessed them, and loaded revised details into the replicator he had brought with him. Then, later that evening, when everyone was watching TV or drinking in bars, he went out and replicated the surge protector.

The next morning, Henry went to meet Andrew in his office. As he knocked on the door, he could see someone in the room talking to Andrew, who waved to Henry and invited him in.

"Ah, hello there Henry, this is Brendan from Kerry County Council," Andrew said as he greeted Henry, and introduced him to Brendan.

"Pleased to meet you," Brendan said to Henry as they shook hands. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Nothing bad, I hope," laughed Henry.

"Oh no, no, no," replied Brendan. "It's all been productive. Andrew's been telling me you've had a few teething problems with your turbine."

"With the protector, you mean?" asked Henry. "I think we may be able to sort that out without too many hiccups."

"Oh, did you manage to trace any industrial sized surge protectors, last night?" Andrew asked him.

"I spoke to my engineers, back at Skipton, last night," said Henry. "They agreed that the protector I had submitted for the project may not have been powerful enough to handle a sudden surge from the Atlantic. I've ordered another one, which I hope will be delivered later today"

"That'd be quick," said Brendan. "I didn't know you had delivery services over here which handled things that quickly."

"Ai, I didn't think anything could be delivered that quickly," added Andrew. "Certainly not here in the Western Isles."

"I had my engineers' sort everything out for me, and send it first class," replied Henry. "I had hoped that the absorption battery would have absorbed any additional energy, but I was told that it may not have responded to a strong surge until it had been in operation for a little while."

"Ai," said Andrew. "Perhaps it was just unlucky that there was a sudden surge of energy soon after the turbine was put into practice."

"You're here early," Henry then said to Brendan. "When did you arrive?"

"Oh I came here last night," Brendan replied. "I decided to leave earlier

yesterday, as I knew I had a few journeys to make. I had to drive to Shannon airport, then flew to Aberdeen, and then on to Stornoway. I stayed in a hotel last night. At least the airport here is just outside town.”

“Are you staying long?” asked Henry.

“I’ve booked myself in for three nights,” said Brendan. “I’m due to fly back on Saturday.”

“That’s good,” said Andrew. “We should be able to have the turbine in operation before you leave, then. I haven’t got a lot on this morning, so we may as well go and visit the site now – what do you say?”

Henry and Brendan agreed, though Henry, in truth, preferred to wait until the afternoon, so he could claim to have received the surge protector, take it to the turbine, and get it installed. When they got to the site, Brendan said that the protector was definitely too small for any immediate surges in pressure from the Atlantic, before they discussed the appropriate size and powered protector to install. With nothing to do there at the time, Henry suggested to go back to Stornoway, and though Andrew suggested to stay for a while and have lunch at Port Nis, Henry said that as he and Andrew had been there the previous day, lunch in Stornoway may be better. There would be more on offer, and added that they could go back to Port Nis the following day. In truth, Henry wanted to get his new surge protector.

When they arrived back at Stornoway, Henry said he wanted to go back to his hotel to check his laptop, though while Andrew took Brendan to the Hebridean Man, Henry went to get the surge protector. It was too big and heavy to carry with him, so he borrowed a trolley from the hotel. He took it in the lift downstairs, where he left it in wrapping near reception, before he went to the Hebridean Man to tell Andrew and Brendan that his order had arrived. When they had had a few drinks and some lunch, he took them back to the hotel, where he opened the package in front of Andrew and Brendan.

“That should be okay for the turbine,” Brendan said as he looked at the surge protector. “It seems similar to the one we had installed off the Kerry coast. Would you mind if I had a closer look?”

“No, no, be my guest,” said Henry.

As Brendan had a closer look at it, he noticed it was virtually the same one as had been installed off the Kerry coast in Ireland, and gave it his approval. Henry was relieved.

“Do you have any electrical staff around your turbine at the moment?” he asked Andrew.

“No, but I was hoping to get some men in to the sub-station tomorrow,” replied Andrew.

“Well, why don’t we go back to your office, see what we can arrange,” suggested Brendan. “Who knows, you may get the turbine up and running before I leave?”

Henry, naturally, agreed, so took the surge protector to his car, before driving it to the council buildings, where he met Andrew in his office with Brendan. His PA had indeed booked a couple of electrical technicians to attend the site the following day. Now they had the necessary equipment to install, too, the turbine may be ready by Friday afternoon. Until Brendan threw a spanner in the works, that is.

“Don’t you think you’d better arrange for the Health & Safety Inspector to come and check it over again, once the ‘protector is installed?” he queried, at which point Henry and Andrew looked at each other.

They debated whether this was necessary, as the whole site had already been inspected. They agreed, however, that an inspection was required for the surge protector only, but also agreed to test the turbine prior to the inspection. Andrew then said that he had messages to sort and paperwork outstanding, so Henry and Brendan went off to pub for a drink or two.

The following day, they all met in the foyer of the council buildings. The new surge protector wasn’t there, so, presuming it had been taken to the site, Andrew drove them to the Butt of Lewis. When they arrived, the site was locked, so Andrew opened the gates with his key, before closing them again. They wondered if this was the correct date, as no-one was on-site as yet, though twenty minutes later, the Electrical Technicians arrived, bringing the surge protector with them.

They stayed there as the technicians checked the sub-station to make sure everything was switched off. When it was clear everything was safe, the technicians brought the surge protector with them. Andrew asked if they could switch the turbine on, though the technicians weren’t too keen. Andrew said it was only to test the turbine, and after a brief debate, the sub-station was carefully inspected, before the turbine was switched on.

Everything appeared to be working fine, though Henry, Andrew and Brendan decided to stay there a little longer. They noticed a few fierce waves crashing against the low cliffs and that the turbine had withstood them. Eventually, when they agreed to go for lunch, at nearby Port Nis, though this time they didn’t stay there too long. When they arrived back at

the turbine, they were pleased to see everything still working. Henry went to look at the energy absorber, which appeared to be fully running. He called Brendan over to take a look, and he too, said all seemed well. After a brief discussion, it was then agreed that everything was working well, so they called the Electrical Technicians and requested they come and switch off the turbine. Henry, Andrew and Brendan then waited for the technicians to arrive, after which they went back to Stornoway, and arranged for a further Health & Safety inspection.

Unfortunately, no Inspectors were available for a couple of weeks, though after a little wrangling and negotiation, and inspection was arranged for the following Thursday. On that note, Henry and Brendan decided to call it a day, after which Henry offered to take Brendan around the island.

"Is there much to see?" asked Brendan.

"I suppose that depends upon what you like looking at," replied Henry. "I didn't expect to see a lot myself, but I went to the south of the island, at Harris, which I thought was rather nice. A bit more scenic, if you like that sort of thing."

"With hills and valleys, and streams running down them, you mean?" queried Brendan.

"Yeah, that's about it, though you're never very far away from the sea." said Henry.

"It sounds a little like where I come from, County Kerry in Ireland," said Brendan. "You don't mind me asking, where do you come from? I mean, you don't seem very local to this place."

Henry wasn't too sure what to say, but decided to say he was from Yorkshire. After all, that's where he'd been living for the past couple of years.

"You don't sound like a Yorkie' to me, either," Brendan commented.

"Ahh, we don't all talk like Wallace & Gromit up in Yorkshire," replied Henry. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, to be honest, and I know a few people who feel the same. 'You get owt for nowt in Yorkshire'," he then said in a Yorkshire accent, to try and throw Brendan off of any scent he may have picked up.

"Perhaps you ought to come to Kerry, one day," said Brendan. "It's pretty much the same, though we have bigger mountains – proper mountains, I mean."

"The Yorkshire Dales are mainly limestone country," explained Henry. "All the rocks have been worn away. It's full of pot holes – some large enough to land a space ship!"

“You don’t strike me as someone who abseils down pot holes?” queried Brendan.

“It’s not really something I’d fancy, to be honest,” admitted Henry. “I quite like walking up the peaks, though, to pass the time away – what little spare time I get to myself, these days.”

“I know what you mean, I know what you mean, I rather like rambling myself,” said Brendan. “Tell me, you actually designed the turbine, didn’t you?”

“Yes I did,” said Henry, gloating a little in the knowledge that the turbine was now working. “How is your turbine in Kerry operating?”

“So far, so good,” said Brendan. “We haven’t encountered any problems as yet.”

“Did you design that turbine?” Henry then asked.

“Oh no, I was just the Planning Manager for the project,” admitted Brendan. “I think someone at the council designed the turbine.”

“You don’t know his name, by any chance?” asked Henry.

“No, I’m afraid not,” said Brendan. “For all I know, it may have been a lady who devised the turbine.”

“I suppose it could,” mumbled Henry. “I suppose I was politically incorrect, too. It just seems odd that the designer wasn’t involved in the project.”

“Perhaps they wanted to remain unknown,” suggested Brendan, who didn’t feel comfortable with the current line of discussion. “Perhaps they received a financial reward from the local council, and wanted to lye low. Not everyone wants to be famous.”

“Perhaps they’ve gone on to bigger and better things,” said Henry. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve been poached by another company somewhere else in the world.”

“That’s possible, that’s possible,” muttered Brendan, at which point he pulled his mobile out of his pocket. “I’d love to look around the island, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to contact my team back home. It seems like something’s cropped up.”

“Not with the turnbine, I hope?” queried Henry.

“I’m not too sure, just at the moment,” replied Brendan, as he stared closely at his mobile. “I’ll meet you back at your hotel when I’ve sorted this out.”

Brendan never did get back to Henry that afternoon, though they and Andrew met for a drink and an evening meal later that night. Brendan didn’t stay too long, though, as he claimed he wanted to prepare for his journey home the next day.

Henry, too, left on Saturday, happy in the knowledge that his turbine had been in operation, however briefly, and that early teething troubles had been rectified. He had hoped that it may be fully operational, or at least in full testing, though was relieved that a second inspection would be carried out in the following week. He had considered staying at Stornoway until everything was ready, but decided he should perhaps examine his other operations. He could keep in touch with Andrew in the meantime, and re-

visit Stornoway when everything was (hopefully) ready.

When he arrived back at Ribblehead Cottage, Henry found Ramondo lying on the sofa, half-asleep.

“Ramondo – are you alright?” he asked loudly, trying to wake him up.

“Hi there, Henry,” yawned Ramondo, before he looked up at the clock. “Is that the time?”

“You seem knackered,” commented Henry. “What have you been up to?”

“Replicating vehicles for the showroom near Leeds,” replied Ramondo.

“They’ve shifted all the stock we had at Skipton, along with a few sales there, too. On the whole, motor sales have been going quite well.”

“Have you heard from Lucas recently?” asked Henry. “Do you know how sales are coming along at Rayners Lane?”

“Sales are pretty good there, too, from what Lucas was telling me,” Ramondo told him.

“How are the new salespeople getting along?” Henry asked.

“No complaints on any of them, including those at Rayners Lane,” confirmed Ramondo. “Mind you, they were all car salespersons previously, apart from Richard Copeland at Skipton.”

“Good, good,” said Henry. “Have you heard from Rico recently?”

“Not since you last heard from him, a couple of weeks ago,” said Ramondo. “I would have chased him up last week, but between visiting sites and replicating vehicles, I haven’t had a lot of time available.”

“I’ll give him a call in the coming week,” said Henry. “Where’s Maria, by the way?”

“In the garden,” Ramondo replied.

“What’s she doing there?” queried Henry, “She shouldn’t be doing anything in the garden in her condition.”

“She’s only resting on the hammock,” said Ramondo, who then asked about the turbine.

Henry explained what had happened.

“That’s cutting things a bit fine,” said Ramondo. “I thought the local council’s contract with their energy supplier only ran until next month.”

“It does,” acknowledged Henry. “The Health & Safety Inspector will come and examine the new surge protector next week, so if all goes well, the council should be able to test the turbine for the next three weeks,”

“What did that Irish chap have to say about the turbine?” asked Ramondo.

“Brendan, you mean?” said Henry. “He seemed to be keen on the turbine and said the new surge protector should be fine – it was similar to one that was installed on the Irish turbine. He didn’t say a lot more though.”

"You're not going back there again, next week?" Ramondo asked him.

"Probably not," replied Henry. "I had thought about doing so, but I'll just keep in regular contact with Andrew."

"Let's hope everything goes well over the coming month," said Ramondo.

"This may be small in national terms, but it's a big scheme for you, which could be good for everyone in the long run."

Henry tried to relax for the rest of the weekend, although he received a call from Arthur the following day. Amongst the topics of conversation, Arthur complained about the reduction in money to the European Space Agency, and whether he should quit his job. He also asked Henry about the turbine, which he confirmed had worked, but which required a further Health & Safety inspection.

As Henry tried to get back into his regular routine on Monday, and chased Rico for the latest business figures for Gaspar & Gonchaves Solar Panelling, he was asked again about the turbine. When he went for lunch, he passed a few friends in the streets of Skipton, who also asked him about the turbine. Henry was becoming a little embarrassed. Later that afternoon, Frank called, to say that the motor sales in California were going well, that they'd have the results for the company's first quarter by the end of the week, but also asking about the turbine. Henry couldn't wait until Thursday, for the inspection to be carried out on the turbine, hoping that all would be well and that testing could commence thereafter.

The next morning, Henry rang Andrew just after 9 o'clock, to check whether the inspection was still due to be carried out on Thursday. This was confirmed. On Thursday morning, he rang Andrew's office once again, but was informed by his PA that Andrew would be away that morning. Henry presumed this was to escort the H&S Inspector to the turbine and to oversee the inspection, so asked if Andrew could call him later to confirm if all went well.

Henry was expecting to hear from Andrew that afternoon, though each time his phone rang, it was somebody else on the other end of the line. Then, after studying the latest results from Gaspar & Gonchaves', he went to check on his outlook, where he noticed a new message pop up. It was from Andrew, confirming that the inspection of the new surge protector had been successful.

Henry was delighted. The message went on to suggest that the inspector seemed keen on reading the original H&S report, trying to look for other

items to inspect, perhaps. The message also confirmed that following this latest inspection, the original report would be slightly amended, and that final testing on the turbine would commence within the next 24 hours.

The first thing he did was to tell Ramondo the good news, before forwarding the email to Arthur, Lucas and Rico. He then thought about contacting California and telling Frank the good news.

"Good Morning, Californian Automobile Company, how can I help?" said the PA as she answered the phone at the other end of the line.

"Could you put me through to Professor Frank Marshall please, if he's available?" requested Henry.

"I'm afraid Professor Marshall is otherwise engaged today," the PA informed him. "I can put you in touch with his assistant, Dr Di Pierri. Who shall I tell him is calling?"

"Henry Retono, shareholder," he told her.

"Please wait a moment, Mr Retono, while I transfer you," said the PA.

For a short while, all Henry could hear was 'Born In The USA' playing on the line, until after about 30 seconds, Steve answered the call.

"Hi Henry, how are you doing?" Steve greeted him. "If you've rung to ask about the company's results for the first quarterly period of our tax year, I'm looking at them right now."

"How are they, or can't you tell me, officially, yet?" queried Henry.

"I can't say too much just at this moment, but they're looking quite healthy," said Steve. "We should break even at the end of our financial year. I'll make sure a report and statistics are sent to you in England."

"Thanks, Steve," said Henry.

"Is there anything else I can do for you today?" Steve then asked.

"In actual fact, I have some good news of my own I'd like to tell you about," Henry said rather jovially. "That turbine I had designed has now passed it's Health & Safety inspection, and will commence testing tomorrow."

"Congratulations," Steve wished him. "I hope the testing is successful. This may lead to bigger and better things for the future. Whenever Frank or Arthur mentioned that project of yours to me, I find it surprising that no-one else ever came up with the idea."

"You say you've heard from Arthur recently?" queried Henry.

"Yeah, he rang last week," Steve told him. "I think he just wanted someone to pass his thoughts to. Apparently, he's not too happy with the European Space Agency cutting his budget. He was asking me if there may be better opportunities for professors at NASA."

"He sounded pretty similar speaking to me, earlier this week," said Henry. "I told him that everyone's budgets are being cut at this moment."

"That's what I told him, too," said Steve. "How is the recession in the UK at the moment? Are there any signs of improvement?"

"The markets have improved and customers are beginning to spend a little more," said Henry. "Employment will take time to fully recover, though. We opened a new branch in the north of England last month, and had eighty applicants for two car salespersons."

"I'm sorry I can't stay too long, but I have to get these results finalised by this afternoon, together with a report," Steve then emphasised. "Frank's got to take these to a meeting with the Governor of California tomorrow morning."

"That's okay," acknowledged Henry. "I'll let you get on with the statistics, and wish you the best of luck. Cheerio for now."

Henry felt satisfied. He thought there shouldn't be any further problems with the testing of the turbine, though he didn't rule out any problems in case things occurred which hadn't been accounted for, even by the Health & Safety Inspection.

Ever-keen to find out how things were going, Henry called Andrew each day during the next week. The following Monday, however, Andrew had some news for him.

"I'm afraid I shan't be here for much longer," he told Henry.

"Going anywhere nice?" Henry asked.

"You could say that," Andrew told him. "It's confidential, so I can't say too much more just at the moment."

"You mean to say you have another job?" Henry asked with a little surprise. "I thought you were just going away on holiday. I dare say you could do with a break."

"No, I am moving jobs," Andrew re-iterated.

"Well I wish you luck, wherever you may be," Henry said to him before asking how the turbine was going.

"So far, so good," said Andrew. "We haven't had any malfunctions, and it's coped with sudden energy surges pretty well."

"When is it due to come into service?" Henry asked.

"We intend to start using the generator from next week, when our contract with Scottish Energy runs out," Andrew confirmed. "We're happy with the turbine, as it's passed all the necessary tests already. It's just a question now of keeping it running, and switching from one sub-station to another."

"That's good," mumbled Henry, as he thought of another question to ask.

"Can I help you with anything else?" Andrew then queried. "I can arrange for you to attend the switching-on of the energy supply, if you like."

"There's one thing you may be able to help me with," Henry then mentioned as an after-thought.

"Oh, what might that be?" queried Andrew.

"That motor manufacturer in California, which I have shares in, have told me they should break even for the first year. Is that good in financial terms?" asked Henry. "I have been considering selling my shares."

"I wouldn't if I were you," advised Andrew. "For a company to break even in it's first year is pretty good going, I'd say, particularly in the current recession. The company are manufacturing eco-friendly vehicles, aren't they?"

"Yes, that's right," said Henry.

"I think that will be a growing trade in the coming years. In the coming century, maybe," suggested Andrew. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No, that's fine," said Henry. "Thanks for your advice. I'll have to come and see you before you leave."

"Well I'll pencil you in to be invited to the official opening of the turbine," said Andrew. "I'll see you around."

Henry was now happier than ever. He wanted to get his hands on the money as soon as possible, to help bolster all his businesses, but was prepared to wait for a year or two. After all, he'd spent many years just wandering through the universe on the Interstellar Pilgrim.

He decided to book a hotel in Stornoway for the following week. When he arrived there on Tuesday afternoon, he went to visit Andrew's office. He noticed the office was beginning to look a little bare.

"Are you clearing your office?" he asked, after they had exchanged greetings

"Something like that," replied Andrew. "My final day is this Friday, but I have three days Annual Leave outstanding, which I want to clear before the end of this month."

"So it's official that you're leaving?" Henry queried.

"Ai, it is indeed," replied Andrew. "Would you like me to get you a tea or a coffee, while you're here?"

"If it's not too much trouble," said Henry. "If you like, I can go and get a couple of drinks from the machine in the corridor, if you'd like one too?"

Andrew requested a cappuccino, before Henry went along to fetch some cups. When he took the drinks back to Andrew's office, he asked him where he was heading to. As Andrew was about to say the name of the company who had taken him on, there was a knock on the door of his office.

"Come in, come in," said Andrew, as he gestured towards the man outside to come in his office, before turning to Henry. "Please meet my successor, Malcolm."

As Malcolm came into the room, Andrew introduced Henry, before he and Malcolm shook hands.

"Andrew's told me a lot about you," Malcolm said to Henry. "You're the chap who designed the new turbine, a bit of an entrepreneur, from what I can gather."

"I wouldn't go that far," said Henry. "Not just yet, anyway. I may consider the status if I become a millionaire someday."

"Well, you know what Del Boy always said – 'This time next year, we'll be millionaires'," Malcolm said with a smile and a cheerful grin.

"I don't think the turbine will start to make a profit until after next year at the earliest," Andrew commented. "He's in this for the long haul, aren't you Henry?"

"Yes I am indeed," acknowledged Henry. "Between this and the motor plant in California, I may not become a millionaire for a little while."

"Do you have any other plans for the future?" Malcolm then asked.

"I believe we can do a lot more with the oceanic energy we have at this island's resources," stated Henry. "I certainly think we could develop more desalination plants along the British coast. I don't intend to develop that idea just yet, though; not at least until this project comes to fruition."

"Someone may have already developed such an idea by then," commented Malcolm.

"I doubt any such idea will be developed in the UK, not with the current government," commented Andrew. "I doubt the idea would take off with the next government, either. They'll be too restricted by the debts owed by the UK."

"That's why this sort of initiative must come from the private sector," said Malcolm

The three of them continued to discuss ideas and resources for another hour or so, until Henry checked his watch and decided to do a little shopping.

The next day, Henry relaxed in the morning, though at midday he decided to go to Andrew's office to hand him a farewell card. When he arrived there, however, he saw Malcolm sitting inside the room. When Henry knocked on the door, Malcolm waved him to come in.

"How are you today?" asked Malcolm

"I'm fine, thanks," replied Henry. "I had a good sleep-in this morning. Is Andrew around at all?"

"No, I'm afraid you've just missed him," advised Malcolm. "I think he went to visit the turbine, take one last look at the structure."

"Perhaps he's gone to see if everything's okay," suggested Henry.

"Probably," replied Malcolm. "I rather like those council vans. I didn't know until yesterday that your factory had produced them."

"I'm glad they're running well," said Henry. "I doubt you'll have any problems with them, but if you do, you can always give me a call, so I can arrange to send one of my engineers round."

"I shouldn't think that would be necessary," said Malcolm. "The engines seem similar to most vehicles. That's why I probably didn't notice any difference in them at first."

"Do you know where Andrew is going?" Henry then asked. "Perhaps I could send him a congratulations letter there, instead?"

"I'm not too sure, to be honest," said Malcolm. "I think he's moving to Glasgow, or somewhere thereabouts, though I don't know who he'll be working for."

"Do you know if Andrew will be coming back this afternoon?" Henry then asked.

"I should think so," said Malcolm. "I know he has a few things to collect here. I can give him your farewell card, or you can stay here and wait for him, if you'd like. He's probably just making sure everything is absolutely 100%, and in good order for Thursday."

"More like having one final lunch and a few drinks with the electrical technicians, I dare say," Henry commented with a laugh.

"Alternatively, you may see him at the official opening of the turbine on Thursday," suggested Malcolm.

"I think I'll do that," said Henry, before handing Andrew's farewell card to Malcolm, and leaving.

Henry had a brief look around the shops after that, before he went back to his hotel room to check his emails on his lap top

Henry decided to take a trip to the neighbouring island of Benbecula, the

next day. He had originally intended to visit one the neighbouring islands of North and South Uist, too, but with only one ferry service each day from Stornoway, this wasn't really an option.

Henry arose relatively early on Thursday morning, in preparation for the official opening of the turbine. After having an early shower, he went downstairs for breakfast, before going back up to his room to brush his teeth and get 'suited & booted' for the occasion.

Henry then went to meet Malcolm at the council offices, and after a brief chat, a call was received from reception that the UK Energy Minister had arrived. Henry and Malcolm then went down to the foyer to meet the minister, before they all boarded taxis which took them to the Butt of Lewis, off the cliffs of which was the turbine.

There was no pomp and ceremony, as had been the case for the opening of the motor plant in California earlier in the year, though the place was full of journalists and TV reporters.

After a brief announcement from the Energy Minister, the turbine was officially declared open. Several questions were then raised, most of which the minister delegated to Malcolm, who in turn delegated some to Henry. That was through no fault of his, though, as the person who knew all the answers, Andrew, wasn't there. The Energy Minister then announced that he had another engagement that day, and headed for his taxi. Journalists and reporters followed him, demanding answers to particular queries, but were simply referred back to Malcolm and Henry.

Eventually, the Energy Minister's taxi drove off. A few journalists and reporters had remained at the presentation, and were soon joined by their colleagues. Henry didn't mind answering the queries raised. He saw this as an opportunity to show himself to the country, at least, if not to the world. His face would now be seen all over TV and in the newspapers, and probably on the internet. But what would they all say about him?

After the journalists left the opening presentation one by one, Henry went back to Stornoway with Malcolm. They had a snack and a pint together, before Henry returned to his hotel room, to check his laptop for messages, and see if there was any news about the turbine. He was interested to read anything which related to him, though nothing on the web appeared immediately. He saw the opening of the turbine on the news later that day, and even saw himself on TV. He was a bit disappointed there were no references to him, and wanted to know what the media thought of him as well as his project.

He read a little about himself the following morning, when he purchased the local newspaper at Stornoway airport. It described him as 'a new light in the darkness of modern engineering', and 'a sharp beam on the cutting edge of technology'. There didn't seem a lot else, though, and the news article emphasised more on how the turbine could revolutionise the UK. That did please Henry, though the benefits would only be borne-out if this idea was taken on by a leading energy company. Henry thought to himself during his flight back to Glasgow, and believed that sooner or later, someone would come along and pursue the idea.

When Henry arrived back home at Ribblehead Cottage late that afternoon, Ramondo and Maria congratulated him on his latest achievement. Ramondo even arranged a celebration party on Saturday, where Lucas, Madaly, Zebrina and Richard Copeland all came along. There was no mention of the Interstellar Pilgrim, not while Richard was there at least.

This Time Next Year...

Henry wanted to map-out his past, however, as though he been born and bred on Earth. His name and colour suggested he was from Africa, which was handy as some countries had no up-to-date records of births, deaths and marriages. He had by now been registered with a national insurance number, and when he checked records linking to this, he found he was now 48 years old. This seemed to fit his looks and features, even though he was actually over 800 years older. He wanted the status which Frank seemed to be getting in California and the USA, and knew he needed these details if he was to become an icon or a celebrity.

Over the next few months, however, Henry didn't seem to get a lot more recognition than he had done previously. There were reports about the turbine on TV and in the media, but contained very little mention of him.

Henry kept in contact with Malcolm on Stornoway, though not to the same degree as he had done with Andrew. Perhaps this was because the main project had now been completed and the turbine continued to operate well.

"By next October, you will have reclaimed most of the money you invested in the project," Malcolm often told him when Henry seemed a little down and dispirited.

Sales at each of the car showrooms seemed to be on the increase, too. Malcolm had spoken to a few other councilors across Scotland, and recommended them, which helped increase the sales. Malcolm even

suggested opening a new showroom in Scotland.

On a positive note, the money from his businesses continued to come in; perhaps not exactly thick and fast, but certainly at a good rate in the times of recession. It was just before Christmas when Henry received the 9 month sales figures from Tenerife for the solar paneling business. What a present that seemed to be! This part of his business took in over 300,000 Euros in revenue, even accounting for additional staff and premises on the neighbouring island of Gran Canaria. There were plenty of hotels all over the Canary Islands requesting solar panelled windows that Gaspar spent most of his time replicating new panels, while Rico was often visiting hotels and negotiating new installation deals. The added advantage of the location was that the Canaries were warm all year round, so there was never a low season for the hotels. Everyone on the islands' was happy, apart from the local gas and electric companies, of course.

Henry also kept in touch with his original colleagues, including Commander Ondichi aboard the Interstellar Pilgrim. The Commander even forwarded a Christmas card to him in December. Henry invited his full team at Christmas, to celebrate in the festivities.

Attention was briefly diverted in the new year, however, when Maria gave birth to a daughter, who she and Ramondo named Rebecca. Doctors at the Royal Lancaster hospital were rather intrigued with Maria, as she was found to have unusual minerals in her body. They quizzed her about her original diet, and where precisely she came from. One doctor even asked her, jokingly, if she was from outer space! In the end, as she was perfectly healthy, as was baby Rebecca, they released her, and it was assumed that this was just a combination of a freak of nature and her early diet. Commander Ondichi sent a Congratulations card online to her. Henry's attentions then reverted to his businesses, particularly after he received a call from Malcolm on Stornoway.

"Hello Henry, how was Christmas?" he asked.

"Pretty good, in all truth," Henry replied. "I had a few nice surprises from parts of my business."

"Oh, what might they be?" asked Malcolm.

"I don't want to divulge too much, but they made between a quarter and half a million pounds."

"Was that including overheads?" queried Malcolm.

"No, I'm afraid," said Henry. "Net profit came to between 100K and 200K. How is the turbine coming along? Have you any idea what the results for the first period are likely to be?"

"I haven't fully analysed them yet, but from what the finance department told me, they should make you about 600K, after admin costs."

"That's nice to hear," said a jolly Henry.

"I've actually rang about some more positive news for us both," Malcolm then told him.

"Oh? What might that be?" asked an intrigued Henry.

"I had a call from BBC Highlands & Islands inviting me to an interview about the turbine," said Malcolm. "I've given them your details and suggested to invite you along, too. You should receive a call or a letter in the next couple of days."

"Have you any idea how long the interview will last?" queried Henry.

"An hour probably, maybe two," said Malcolm. "It'll be whittled down to about 5 minutes on the local news channel, though. I don't suppose you get Highlands & Islands TV in Yorkshire?"

"No, but I may be able to get it on satellite," said Henry.

"Come to think of it, the interview may be shown in full on News 24," said Malcolm.

"Do you know where the interview will be held?" asked Henry.

"Inverness, probably," confirmed Malcolm. "I don't suppose you know the place, off hand?"

"I have been there on one occasion," Henry told him. "It was only for a short while on my way to Stornoway, though."

"If you receive an invitation, perhaps you may want to give me a call, so we can arrange to meet at a suitable time," suggested Malcolm.

"I'll do that," said Henry.

The following day, Henry received a call from the BBC inviting him to an interview in Inverness on Tuesday January 19th 2010, and by the end of the week he had received a letter confirming this. He arranged to meet Malcolm at Inverness Airport the day before.

There were no flights to Inverness from Leeds/Bradford airport, so Henry had to travel to Manchester to get there. He could have taken the early flight, but the next wasn't until mid afternoon, not arriving at the airport until nearly 6pm in the evening. Henry thought about driving there, but remembered how long it took him when he drove there the previous winter. In the end, he decided to catch the later flight.

When he arrived at Inverness Airport and had gone through customs, he saw, to his surprise, Malcolm.

"Have you been waiting long?" Henry asked as he walked over to him.

“About an hour-and-a-half,” replied Malcolm. “I bought a magazine and a book to read, as I knew you may be a while. This is only a small airport.”

“I thought about driving here,” said Henry. “I wouldn’t have been any later.”

“Nahhh, you don’t want to be driving all the way from Yorkshire to Inverness,” Malcolm commented. “You’d be driving all day, and that wouldn’t be good preparation for an interview.”

“I suppose you’re right,” mumbled Henry. “Shouldn’t we get a move-on, otherwise hotels in town may be fully booked by the time we get there.”

“I shouldn’t worry too much,” Malcolm told him. “I know a few guest houses in the centre of town that will always have some rooms available. They’re inexpensive, too.”

“That reminded me,” said Henry. “Do you have the first quarterly figures for the turbine?”

“Yes, thanks, I’ve got them with me,” said Malcolm. “They’re slightly better than what had originally anticipated.”

“Oh good,” said Henry as they walked towards the taxi rank.

“This time next year, Henry,” said Malcolm. “It looks like you’ll be well on the way.”

“I don’t consider these figures a profit, in any way,” Henry replied. “This will go to recoup the initial expense of the project. Don’t forget, it was all done with my finances – we didn’t get anything from parliament. I’d rather not say anymore for now, and look at the figures when we’ve got accommodation for the night.”

Henry and Malcolm booked into a small guest house that evening. It was only a mile or so from the local TV studios, which suited them both.

They each got up early the next morning, and went straight to the bathroom to wash and shave. After a hearty fried breakfast, they each, in turn, went to brush their teeth carefully, wrinse their mouths and put on after-shave. By 9 o’clock, Henry and Malcolm were each ready for their interview.

After a brief debate on getting to the studios, it was agreed, on Malcolm’s suggestion, to walk the journey. When they arrived at reception, a lady came to greet them, and led them each to seperate dressing rooms, where they ‘prepared’, before they were each taken to the interview room.

Before opening the session, the interviewee welcomed them both, introduced herself, and announced that this was additionally being played on local radio, and was due to be broadcast on local TV, and on News 24. As the cameras took focus, the interviewee then introduced herself, Henry

and Malcolm for the TV audience. After a brief description of the turbine, she introduced a brief film of it, before opening the debate. She first asked Malcolm about the turbine's benefits.

"The main benefit is that the turbine is using natural energy from the Atlantic Ocean, and is not reliant upon fossil fuels," explained Malcolm. "This also means lower costs, and hence, savings, which we have passed on to residents of the Western Isles."

"Can you elaborate on that?" the lady then asked Malcolm.

"First of all I should emphasise that we are merely administering the energy," he told her. "The company supplying the energy, via the new turbine, is run by my colleague, Henry."

The lady then turned to Henry and asked him to elaborate.

"Basically, we do not have to purchase oil or gas from other parts of the world, and hence, will ensure a lower cost of energy," Henry pointed out.

"Our only charges are to the Western Isles Council, for administering the system, and for regular and routine maintenance."

"What maintenance might that be?" she then asked him.

"The turbine is in motion in the Atlantic," said Henry. "Therefore, it is constantly being bombarded by the ocean, which will lead to wear and tear. Perhaps you can consider it rather like the Forth Road Bridge."

"But will this lead to the turbine being closed down?" she queried. "Surely it will need to be switched off while any maintenance is being carried?"

"We have built in an auxiliary energy supply," Henry informed her. "The waves off the Atlantic are constant, whereas residents of the Western Isles will utilise less energy overnight, for instance. The auxiliary system will absorb the additional energy not being utilised."

"Can you be sure the turbine and its auxiliary are sufficient for the Western Isles?" the lady then asked.

"Yes we can," chipped-in Malcolm. "The turbine has been tested, and shown to be more than adequate for its environment."

"I can confirm that a similar turbine has been constructed in County Kerry, Ireland," said Henry. "That is a larger model. All items in the turbine are appropriately larger to cater for a larger population."

"I understand that you have gained revenue for the first quarter of the turbine?" the lady then queried.

"That is correct," said Henry, before she turned to Malcolm.

"Can you confirm that this is slightly higher than the profit made by your former energy supplier?" she then asked, to which Malcolm acknowledged, before Henry reacted to this.

"I should stress that anything resembling a profit is at this stage, is purely re-couping the initial costs of the project," he emphasised to her. "We will not profit from this project until the turbine's second year of operation."

"I understand that you've reduced the tariffs?" she then asked Henry.

"That is correct," he replied. "If we were merely concerned on making a profit, we would simply have increased the tariffs by 50%, to recoup the costs in the first year, and then reduced them to last years levels, simply claiming we made a reduction. We have already, in fact, reduced the tariffs to the customer by 25%."

"Do you intend to reduce the tariffs further, thereafter?" she asked.

"That is my company's intention, though it is too early to give any assurances," Henry replied. "This recession may continue or get worse, and any decision is subject to market forces."

"What do you say to any criticism of your handling of this?" she then asked.

"I am not a local resident to these parts, but I haven't heard any criticism of my operations," said a surprised Henry, before turning to Malcolm.

"I haven't heard any criticisms, not in Scotland nor in the Western Isles," added Malcolm, who was just as baffled.

"If there are any criticisms, they're probably coming from major energy operators," Henry then added. "We saw one of the giant oil companies' profits halve from the previous year. That was acknowledged to be due to the reduction in the price of oil. Despite this, energy companies haven't yet halved their tariffs."

"My colleague is right," added Malcolm. "If the price of oil purchased to produce energy has halved, costs to the customers haven't yet been fully passed on."

"Far be it from me to defend energy companies," said the interviewee, "but could it be that they are saving towards major ecological projects such as the turbine?"

"I haven't heard anything about such projects," replied Malcolm.

"Nor have I," added Henry. "None of the large energy companies have approached me for anything like this. In fact, I proposed the turbine over a year ago, and wrote to all energy companies. I didn't receive as much as an acknowledgement from any of them."

"Do you have any other schemes or projects in the pipeline?" she then asked Henry.

"I have a few which I would like to carry out at some point," he replied.

"However, these are larger than the turbine, and would require greater

financial support than I can currently provide.”

“Would you like to elaborate on your future projects?” she requested.

“I would like to further develop solar energy,” replied Henry. “Successive UK governments have proposed ‘cheap housing’ but never affiliated this with solar paneling, to reduce energy costs, and put the UK firmly at the head of modern development, not merely trying to keep pace with other nations.”

“Strong words,” said the interviewee. “Do you have any other projects in mind?”

“I believe we shall, at some time in the very near future, require de-salination plants,” said Henry. “This will increase our local water supply, while also reducing the growing threat of increased sea levels.”

The female interviewee then turned to Malcolm.

“Do you have any future ecological projects for the Western Isles?” she asked.

“Not at present,” said Malcolm. “We shan’t require de-salinations plants, as we have a lot of natural water within the islands. I would say these projects would be more suited to major cities, particularly in the south of England.”

“De-salination plants may reduce the water levels from the seas around our coast, but not by very much, surely?” she then queried with Henry.

“Individually, these will not reduce sea levels,” he agreed. “If we develop several of them, however, we may be able to reduce sea levels sufficiently to avoid too much of our land ending up under water.”

“Have you consulted the Environment Agency about this?” she queried.

“No, not as yet,” admitted Henry. “Another suggestion for our environment is to develop reservoirs in strategic locations. This may avoid future flooding after periods of heavy rainfall.”

“That may not be a cheap or popular option,” the interviewee commented.

“I accept it may not be, particularly if the reservoir is next to someone’s back yard,” Henry acknowledged. “However, the alternative is to be flooded. I know which situation I’d rather have.”

The interviewee then asked some questions which had been sent in by viewers. She then asked Henry about his businesses, and referred to him as an entrepreneur. Henry said that he was flattered by this, but that he was just trying to make the world a better, more-healthy, place to live. Any financial gains were a bi-product of his and his team’s ingenuity, and would be well-deserved if man could live in a regulated environment. He also emphasised that climate change would eventually lead to catastrophic

events, and that come the next century, it would be too late to turn the clock back. The interviewee then thanked Henry and Malcolm for attending and shook their hands, before closing the interview

"So, what time's your flight home?" Malcolm asked Henry as they walked out of the interview room.

"Not until after 5' this afternoon," Henry informed him. "How do you think we did at the interview?"

"I think we did pretty well," said Malcolm. "You certainly let them know where you stand with your views. If you don't mind me saying, you may run a business, but you sounded more like a consumer advisor."

"I suppose so," muttered Henry. "I just think there are too many business managers out there that are only interested in themselves and what they can get."

"If you ask me, it's not just businessmen, and women," said Malcolm. "Look at our MPs."

"My view is that you have to gain the trust of your customers," Henry told him. "There are too many businesses out there which 'offer' customer service, but only in the company's interest."

"Ai, ai," agreed Malcolm. "There's a shopping precinct not too far away - shall we go to one of the pubs there to have a bite to eat for lunch?"

"I thought we might get a taxi back to the airport, unless you have anything to collect at the guest house?" queried Henry.

"I'm not too keen on some of these airport retail facilities. I reckon they're a bit of a rip-off," Malcolm then commented. "There are a few pubs nearby and a restaurant in the precinct, where we'll get fresh food and a better choice, probably."

"I suppose you're right," said Henry, before he looked out of a window and saw the rain coming down outside. "For the moment, I think we should wait in the foyer."

Malcolm agreed, and when the rain stopped, he and Henry went to have lunch and a pint or two nearby, before they called a taxi to take them to Inverness Airport, where they went their separate ways.

Henry was rather pleased with himself, by the time he arrived home. He spent the next two hours telling Ramondo and Maria all about the interview.

It wasn't until the following Monday that a little of the interview was shown on BBC Highlands & Islands regional TV. Henry tuned into the channel that evening to watch the interview, though what was shown lasted barely 5

minutes, and that included a few clips of the turbine. The interview was shown in full on BBC News 24 the next day, and on BBC 2 the following Monday, after which Henry seemed to get a little more recognition; at least in Skipton and the local towns & villages, anyway.

The anticipated number of calls for Henry's creative and ecological ideas never materialised over the following month, however. Then, one day, Henry heard a knock at the door, and went to open it.

"Andrew!" he said with surprise.

"Hello there, Henry, and how are you doing today?" he asked as he put his arm forward to shake Henry's hand.

Henry then welcomed Andrew inside the house, before closing the door. He introduced him to Maria, and asked her to put the kettle on.

"Would you like tea or coffee?" she asked.

"I don't mind either," said Andrew. "I'll have one sugar in tea, or two in coffee."

Henry then led Andrew into the lounge, where they sat down.

"So, what brings you here?" Henry asked.

"I never really had the chance to say farewell properly, at Stornoway," Andrew admitted. "I had hoped to be at the opening of the turbine, but had to go to Glasgow for a few days to sort out my new job."

"What is your new job now, by the way?" asked Henry

"Energy Production Manager," replied Andrew, before changing the subject slightly. "To be honest, I felt a little guilty leaving Malcolm to deal with the press and media at the opening of the turbine."

"Well, most of the questions he couldn't answer he delegated to me," said Henry.

"How is Malcolm settling into my old role?" asked Andrew. "I noticed you both on TV last month, so I presume you keep in touch?"

"I have spoken to him from time to time, to ask how the turbine is operating," confirmed Henry.

"How do you find him?" asked Andrew.

"He's fine, though I get the impression he's a bit of a skinflint," said Henry.

"I've thought about going back to Stornoway sometime, but wanted to leave my calendar clear for the time being, in case I get any productive calls, if you know what I mean."

"Ai, I know what you mean," said Andrew as he grinned. "Have you had any productive calls, or any new contracts?"

"No, not yet," sighed Henry.

"I wouldn't get too despondent," Andrew advised him. "I'm sure something

will come along. You've got too many ideas to be developed, for nothing to come along. It's probably just happening at an awkward time."

"I guess you're right," sighed Henry. "I hope you're right."

"Is something the matter?" Andrew asked him.

"No, it's nothing really," replied Henry.

"Nothing is nothing," said Andrew. "Something's bothering you, isn't it?"

"That car plant in California I told you about," Henry said to him. "I often spoke to the MD over there, and half-expected to be offered the Assistant MD post, when it was eventually implemented."

"And you didn't get it?" queried Andrew.

"No – it was given to the MD's former assistant at NASA," said Henry.

"Did you apply for the post?" asked Andrew.

"I never even got to find out about the post," moaned Henry. "One minute the MD, Frank, was telling me he may need an assistant, and a few weeks later, I rang him and spoke to his newly-appointed no. 2 instead."

"Do you know this other bloke?" queried Andrew.

"Don't get me wrong, I knew the bloke, Steve, who's a pretty decent chap, from the dealings I've had with him," Henry commented. "The thing is, I helped the company by sending over some of my cars, while the plant was still under construction. The cars were my idea, or my engineers', at least."

"If you don't mind me saying, I think you're better off here," Andrew told him. "California isn't all it's cracked-up to be. The recession is hitting them over there, too. Besides, I can see why the Western Isles may appeal to you."

"Oh, how's that?" asked Henry.

"Well, you seem to like living in the middle of nowhere, judging by the local environment around here," Andrew commented.

"I've lived all my life in one empty wilderness or another," replied Henry, not elaborating on where these empty locations may have been. "How did you get here, by the way?"

"Oh I drove down from Glasgow," said Andrew. "I thought about flying to Leeds' or Manchester airport, but that would have meant another long journey by taxi. I thought about catching a train to Carlisle or Preston, but a taxi from there would have been even longer."

"Next time you come here, you may as well take a train ride – there's a station right next to the house," Henry told him. "You can get here from Carlisle."

"I noticed the railway line when I was coming here," Andrew said a little

inquisitively. "I didn't think there'd be a station in the middle of nowhere, though."

"In actual fact, there are more stations in the middle of nowhere, up in Scotland," replied Henry. "Like Tulloch and Rannoch Moor, for instance."

"Ai, you're right," admitted Andrew. "Tell me, is this the Settle and Calisle line, we often hear about?"

"Yes it is," confirmed Henry. "Mind you, there aren't many trains running on this line, about half-a-dozen a day, each way."

"Probably about five services too many, if you ask me," commented Andrew.

"Actually, this station is perhaps a little more popular than you may think," Henry then suggested.

"Oh really?" asked Andrew.

"Ribblehead station is in the middle of the Three Peaks of Yorkshire," Henry told him. "You must have heard of them? There's an annual race combining all three of them each year."

"I suppose it can't be too difficult to run up and down theses three midgets," laughed Andrew. "Up in Scotland, we have real mountains."

Henry then asked Andrew about his new job, when, all of a sudden, they heard a whaling scream from upstairs.

"I'll go and see to baby Rebecca," Maria announced from the kitchen, at which point Henry asked to be excused while he went to make the tea. A few minutes later, Henry went back to the lounge, with a couple of cans of bitter instead.

"I thought you'd prefer one of these," he said to Andrew.

"Ai, you know me," said Andrew, who couldn't help grinning. "I shouldn't drink too much, though, as I'm driving."

"You can stay here for the night," suggested Henry.

"I wouldn't mind, but I haven't anything else to wear overnight," said Andrew. "Thanks for the offer, anyway."

Henry then went to the sideboard and picked out a couple of pints, one of which he passed to Andrew.

"I think you gave a good account of yourself at that TV interview last month," Andrew then told him, as he poured the bitter into his glass. "You certainly will have appealed to the environment, and to the consumer, too."

"People have said that to me, but I went there to fight for myself, rather than the consumer," admitted Henry.

"You may even appeal to people as a new Prime Minister," said Andrew.

"Together with Joanna Lumley as Foreign Secretary, Esther Rantzen as

Home Secretary and Carol Vorderman as Chancellor, you'd make a great team."

"I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be flattered by that?" queried Henry.

"Seriously, the four of you would make a better team than the current one we have at Westminster," said Andrew. "You certainly wouldn't be any worse."

"That is probable, but it isn't going to bring any new developments to this country," Henry replied. "We need our energy companies to act more in the interests of the environment. If it makes things cheaper for the consumer, then that's an added bonus."

"I know, I know," said Andrew. "I may have some positive news for you."

"Oh?" said a bemused Henry.

"I know that Scottish Energy are looking at new technologies, and how to best utilize our own environment," Andrew told him.

"Where did you hear that?" asked Henry, sipping his pint.

"It's policy, as implemented by the company's Energy Production Manager," replied Andrew. "That's me!"

Henry turned around with surprise, before congratulating Andrew and shaking his hand again. Andrew simply smiled.

"Well done, well done," Henry added. "Perhaps now our energy companies may start to utilise our resources."

"It's not going to happen overnight, I'm afraid," warned Andrew. "I convinced Scottish Energy that the best way forward was to utilise our natural resources. This will cost far less than oil from other parts of the world. I said that the turbine was just the start of an environmental revolution, and that we needed to be at the forefront."

"Too true," said Henry. "Mind you, come to think about it, I hadn't thought you'd be the sort of person they'd appoint. I mean, you helped with the turbine. It's like you've been batting for the other side."

"I think you'll find that's called poaching," said Andrew. "It happens every day. You just have to look at the football transfer market. If the offer is large enough, anyone will accept the bait."

"So, what plans do you have?" asked Henry.

"I'd like to develop another turbine or two along the Scottish coast," replied Andrew. "I'd like to work with you, rather than against you, as I know that you will come up with further revolutionary ideas that we should take full advantage of."

"What other visions do you have?" asked Henry. "A fleet of digital motors, perhaps?"

"That would be handy for the future, but I'll leave any further ideas to you," suggested Andrew. "However, we don't require de-salination plants, and we don't get enough sun to develop solar paneling."

"They would be more suitable for the Environment Agency to implement," said Henry. "Would I be able to propose ideas to other authorities and businesses?"

"I don't see why not, if it doesn't directly affect Scottish Energy," replied Andrew. "It would be useful if you can keep in contact with Malcolm at Stornoway. The more savings the Western Isles council make, the better it will be for us, as we can demonstrate the benefits of these projects."

"So, what are you offering me?" asked Henry.

"I'm not sure just yet," said Andrew. "I'd like to work with you as a consultant, to start with. What materialises from there depends upon other factors. Ultimately, what happens to me will depend on some of these factors. I can't say fairer than that, can I?"

"That's fine by me," said Henry. "Will I be in receipt of a salary, or one-off payments as and when my services may be required?"

"Probably the latter," said Andrew. "I've got that interview on DVD. If you have the sales figures for the first three months of operation of the turbine, I may be able to sell the idea to the Board."

Henry went upstairs to get the sales figures for the turbine from his safe. He took them to his mini office, where he copied them, before putting the original back in his safe. He then took the copy down to Andrew, who had taken out a contract which he gave to Henry.

"Is everything on there okay?" Andrew asked him.

"It seems to be," said Henry. "An ad-hoc role may suit me, as I have other businesses to monitor, and may need to visit them from time to time."

"There is one other option," Andrew suggested before Henry signed the contract.

"What might that be?" asked Henry.

"The patent to the turbine is probably yours," Andrew pointed out.

"What about the one in Ireland?" Henry queried.

"I checked that one over," said Andrew. "It was first drawn-up shortly after you first sent me your proposals."

Henry became rather curious.

"I seem to recall you telling me that you submitted your proposals elsewhere, before sending them to the Western Isles council?" Andrew asked. "That would make the date it was drawn-up even earlier and avoid any dispute."

Henry went to search for any saved messages on his email facilities. It seemed, however, that these may have been deleted. He then went to check a file of letters he had kept, and found some dating back to November 2008. He took the file down to Andrew and showed it to him.

"I suggest you make a claim for the patent, before they do in Ireland," advised Andrew.

"So what do you want to do about the contract?" Henry asked him.

"That's up to you," replied Andrew. "If you have the patent, we, Scottish Energy I mean, can buy it off of you for about £100K, perhaps."

"Hold on a minute," said Henry. "The patent would be worth far more than that. The current figures for the turbine are greater. It could make up to a million pounds in one year. If you take on similar projects, just think how much money you can gain when the turbines come to fruition."

"That's something to speculate about in the future," said Andrew. "What do you want to do at the moment?"

"Make a claim for the turbine, to start with," insisted Henry. "Is there an address online?"

"There's a sight to send your claim to online," Andrew advised him. "See what you can come up with. If you need any support, just let me know."

Henry then went to examine the contract Andrew had offered him, before signing it.

"I thought you were going to apply for the patent?" Andrew asked him

"We don't know the outcome of that, yet," pointed out Henry. "For now, I'd sooner sign this. We can see whatever happens to the patent in the future."

"Ai, ai, that makes sense," agreed Andrew. "I'll give you a personal copy of the contract, and raise this at the next Board meeting."

"If you explain the financial benefits of the turbine, perhaps the board may accept the patent for a million quid," suggested Henry.

"What!" shrieked Andrew.

"If it makes a million quid in one year, and you have the rights to several turbines, Scottish Energy will be quids-in," insisted Henry.

Andrew thought to himself for a moment.

"I suppose it does make sense," he admitted. "I doubt the Board will see it that way, though."

"I could keep the patent and sell it to the highest bidder," said Henry.

"Hold on a moment," said Andrew. "Don't you think you owe me, if not Scottish Energy, something? I told you about the patent."

"How about half-a-million quid, and 10% of the profits?" suggested Henry.

"I'll see what the Board say," replied Andrew. "That's if they agree to the proposal of new turbines."

"And if they don't agree, I can keep the patent?" suggested Henry.

"If the Board don't agree to the proposals, I'd like a share of the patent," said Andrew. "After all, I brought this to your attention."

"Agreed," Henry said to him. "We can discuss the percentages when we know a little more about what's going to happen."

Henry then walked over to the sideboard and took out a bottle of champagne.

"Would you like some?" he asked Andrew.

"Thanks for the offer, but don't you think it's a bit premature, just at the moment?" commented Andrew. "You may have signed a contract, but the Board haven't agreed to anything yet. If my proposal doesn't go through, there may not be any developments to consult you about."

"I just feel that I can see the light at the end of the tunnel," said Henry.

"Save the champagne for next time," suggested Andrew. "I may have better news next time I come to visit you."

Just then, Maria came downstairs and went to sit with Henry and Andrew. When she saw they had been drinking, she went back to the kitchen and made herself a cup of coffee, before going back and talking to Henry and Andrew.

They were still talking a couple of hours later, when Ramondo arrived home. After he was introduced to Andrew, he went to the kitchen to take three more cans of bitter, before joining-in the debate with the others.

A little later, Henry agreed to treat them all, as they went for a meal at the Inn around the corner, by which time, Andrew had agreed to stay the night at Ribblehead Cottage.

Andrew drove back to Glasgow the following morning. The first thing Henry did after that was to apply for the patent for the sea turbine. He scanned his earliest letters, and sent them along, too, and copied-in Andrew and Malcolm.

Henry received a reply a few days later, confirming receipt of this. The claim was then audited over the next few weeks, and with support from Andrew and Malcolm, the patent was awarded to Henry.

More good news followed before Easter, when Andrew came to visit him. The proposal for a second turbine was passed by the Board of Scottish Energy, which meant that Henry would be utilised as a Consultant. The Board hadn't been too keen on purchasing the patent from Henry,

however.

This brought interest from other sources. One of the railway companies in south-east England invited Henry as a Consultant for a similar turbine. Though the original suggestion of locating this near the white cliffs of Dover was thrown-out immediately, it was eventually agreed to install this in the small cove of Fairlight, near Hastings.

Between these projects, and the other businesses he had developed, Henry began to gain a lot of money. He now had capital of his own and the banks were prepared to lend him money for further developments. Indeed, by the end of 2010 he was a millionaire. Not bad going for a man who had been traveling through the universe just five years earlier.

THE END

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