

KELVIN KEPLER AND THE SECOND THIRD PLANET

(A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL - SAMPLER)

(A NOVEL FOR THE YOUNG THAT THE
OLDER CAN ENJOY)

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PART 1

The Hidden Second Third

PROLOG

Kikksabut stared at the star and scratched the top of his head frantically. "By the beard of Baal, I'll be a balding Babylonian," he said. Which was a silly prediction, as he already was totally bald and definitely a Babylonian.

"What is it, Master?" His slave Mustapha stood a safe distance from Kikksabut's good kicking foot, remembering the last time his master had scratched his head in that fashion. The Sun that day had disappeared behind a mysterious black disc for no known reason and Mustapha's behind was the nearest kickable object. Mustapha now fully respected his master's method of showing scientific puzzlement.

"That star up there." Kikksabut stabbed the air with his bejewelled index finger.

"You mean Nevakansneezer?" Mustapha said. "What's it done now?"

Mustapha couldn't understand his master's fascination with stars, let alone this special rogue. And this one was a rogue, no doubt about that. He had seen Kikksabut get angry when a slave girl accidentally dropped a grape up his nose, or when his favourite chariot horse whoopsied on his palace's marble, or even when the King borrowed his prize camel and forgot to return it. But he had never seen Kikksabut get so consistently angry as when he went to his palace roof of to measure the motion of this cursed Nevakansneezer.

"It's moved again, by Baal." Kikksabut began to tug his beard as if to pull it out by the roots.

Mustapha took two quick steps back. Beard pulling was an even worse sign than head scratching.

"Isn't that why we call them planets or wanderers? Because they move?"

"Yes, but it's supposed to move over there." Kikksabut jabbed his finger at a point in the sky directly above the hanging gardens.

"Quick, my papyrus and brush. Write this down."

Mustapha loaded the sharpened brush with squid ink and waited, poised over the papyrus sheet.

"Nevakansneezer, four hand spans to right of Camel's Nose, two hand spans below Baal's Elbow. Got that?"

Mustapha dutifully recorded these scientific measurements of the star's position in the sky. Personally, he had never been able to recognise the objects those groups of stars were supposed to represent. The Camels Nose looked to him more like a loaf of bread with olives and anchovies. And Baal's Elbow? If the poor god had an elbow like that, he should see a doctor about it. But then, he wasn't an astronomer and didn't understand these scientific things.

"Yes master. Got it," Mustapha replied. "Camel's Elbow and Baal's Nose."

"Put the date down too," Kikksabut commanded.

"What is the date, master?" Mustapha asked politely. Actually, it was 1800 B.C but of course, Mustapha didn't know that. Neither

did Kikksabut.

“Fool. It’s 54 After Kikksabut’s Birthday,” he said and delivered a well aimed kick to his insolent slave’s rear end.

And so it was that these measurements of the rogue planet Nevakansneezer were recorded and, eventually, stored in the library of the King of Babylon, waiting for posterity to recognise the true significance of the star’s strange behaviour. Sadly, in 78 A.K.B. a group of roaming acrobats, hired by Kikksabut to entertain the King in the royal palace, accidentally collapsed a twenty person human pyramid, squashed the King’s favourite cat and set fire to the curtains, burning the palace to the ground.

For his squashed moggsy, the King permanently relieved Kikksabut of the need to tug his beard or scratch his head ever again. And the palace ashes deprived the world of Kikksabut’s records of Nevakansneezer.

The burning Sun, Ra, had quit for the day and took cover below the horizon, barely avoiding a painful stab by the tip of the Great Pyramid. Tutin-Rutin waited impatiently for the stars to appear while he sipped his favourite drink. Slurped would be more accurate. One never sipped a Sphinx’s Nose Breaker. Full appreciation of the fermented sour goats milk, aged in crocodile skin casks and served in hollow hippopotamus tusks could only be achieved by slurping, the noisier the better. Tutin-Rutin took pride in the excessive noisiness of his slurping. He was after all, as Palace Astronomer to the court of Cleopatra VII, a connoisseur.

At last the stars were at full brightness. As expected, Nix-do-Archoo was in the wrong position. Tutin-Rutin spat out a crocodile scale and decided the only predictable thing about this star was its unpredictability. Just like his favourite wig, it was never where he had left it.

Tutin-Rutin clapped his hands imperiously and immediately a dozen slaves rushed across his house’s roof like a gaggle of geese racing for breadcrumbs. They knelt at his feet awaiting orders. Each held a measuring tool of Tutin-Rutin’s design. Tutin-Rutin prided himself as an innovator ahead of his time. He also prided himself as a man of few words. He pointed to Nix-do-Archoo, shining like a jewel over the Nile, outshining even the red star that seemed to follow a predictable path, like all the other Wanderers. He clapped his hands again and his slaves sprang into action.

One slave rushed off the roof and returned with a fresh Sphinx’s Nose Breaker for his master, a necessity for astronomical observations.

The others, in a ballet of organised chaos, arranged their tools about a marble statue of Tutin-Rutin and aimed them at Nix-do-Archoo. When satisfied all was ready, the slaves threw themselves on the ground and rubbed their noses in it.

Tutin-Rutin raised his bulk from his couch and strolled to the Tutin-lobe (as he chose to call it). He measured off the distances using the exquisite carvings on the ivory arms of the device and clapped his hands. (Tutin-Rutin loved hand clapping. He could clap in five different languages and had a reputation at the Queen’s court that even when caught by surprise, he was never short of a clap.)

“Scribe thus,” Tutin-Rutin clapped in command to his slave poised with a stylus over a papyrus sheet. “Two hippo heads above Isis’s Beak, three crocodile jaws right of Ra’s Rump.”

“Gotcha!” the scribe confirmed.

Tutin-Rutin shook his head sadly. This new lower Nile slang will have to be stopped. “Date,” he clapped. This of course was a question but a man in his position ought to know so he didn’t ask. He simply commanded.

“35 B.C.” the scribe advised and recorded it on the Papyrus. “Prize crocodile” the slave muttered under his breath. “Royal astronomer and doesn’t even know it’s 35 years after the birth of Cleopatra. Wait till I tell the cooks about this.”

Little did the scribe realise, by one of those crazy coincidences, it was in fact also 35 B.C. by modern measure. But he could hardly know that.

“That’s it then.” Tutin-Rutin downed the last of his drink with a creditable slurp that could be heard all the way to the Queen’s palace. “Bind those recordings with the others and store them in the Great Library. I’m going hippo hunting.” He didn’t actually say that but conveyed the meaning with the appropriate barrage of hand claps.

If the Great Library of Alexandria and all its contents hadn’t been burnt to the ground in 374 A.D. we would have been able to learn that Tutin-Rutin never returned from his hippo expedition. Sadly, one of his new slaves misheard a long series of claps as “Toss me overboard in front of that bull hippo there” instead of “Row like crazy and get us out of here” as Tutin-Rutin intended. But it was, so we never will.

Also, we would have benefited from Tutin-Rutin’s expert observations of that bright star Nix-do-Archoo and learnt of its existence, let alone its strange behaviour. But it did and we didn’t. Great hopping hippos!

Pupo Galliani was wishing he had a telescope to study the crazy planet better. No, that’s not quite accurate. As telescopes were not invented until 1609 A.D. and Pupo was sitting on the roof of his villa in Pisa, Italy, licking the remains of a particularly juicy ham and pepperoni pizza from his beard in the year 1565 A.D. such a wish was not possible.

What Pupo was really wishing was that he could fly up into the sky and get a closer look at the cursed thing. No. That’s not accurate either, since he had no concept of manned flight, and even if he did, he wouldn’t say so. He had no desire to be burnt at the stake as a witch.

Sadly, everything Pupo ought to wish for to help him solve the mystery of the planet Il-Pupo hadn’t been invented yet so he couldn’t. He had to rely on the age old methods of eyeball observation, with the aid of the odd measuring stick and his trusty thumb.

But if anyone could solve the mystery, he could. The greatest astronomer since Copernicus, he had been studying the position (it would be more accurate to say positions, since this planet seemed to be everywhere except where it was expected) for his entire career of forty years. And tonight he was going to take his final measurement, go to the university where he had the finest mathematicians in Italy waiting, and compute the orbit of this planet which has eluded astronomers and great thinkers for so many centuries.

Not for the first time, Pupo puzzled over why there were no ancient records of the planet’s orbit. You’d have thought the Babylonians or the Egyptians would have noticed the star and kept records. At certain times of the year, it is so bright you could almost read by it.

Well, tonight’s the night, Pupo my lad, he thought smugly, extracting a loose olive from his beard and downing it with a slurp of

vino. Il-Pupo is shining up there in all its glory, and I don't need any non-invented telescope to measure its position.

He strode purposefully to his measuring stick, savouring the moment, pen and book in hand. He gazed along the stick, lined it up on Il-Pupo, then recorded its position, the exact time and date. The final measurement.

Pupo smacked his lips at the thought of the world wide fame his computation of the planet's orbit would bring. This would make them keep the name he had given it. Il-Pupo! It had a ring to it. (Of course, if he had a telescope, he would know that wasn't true. Unlike Saturn, it had no rings. It had something entirely different.) He put on his hat with the flowing ostrich plumes, donned his ankle length angora cape, and walked to the stairs. Smiling, he took one last look over his shoulder at Il-Pupo before heading to the university.

Il-Pupo shone brighter than Jupiter upon the town of Pisa. Then... Il-Pupo blinked.

Pupo Galliani blinked.

And like a candle being blown by a gust of wind, Il-Pupo flickered, then went out.

Just like that.

Pupo Galliani took up growing olives on the outskirts of Pisa. He grew the best in Italy. They were called Il-Pupos by the marketeers. Pupo called them olives.

His olives were seen on every pizza in Italy.

Il-Pupo was never seen again.

Until...

*

The Planets

Planet's Name

Discovered By

Mercury	The Ancients
Venus	The Ancients
Earth	(Our home planet)
Mars	The Ancients
Jupiter	The Ancients
Saturn	The Ancients
Uranus	William Herschel, 1781
Neptune	Adams & Le Verrier, 1846
Pluto (now a Dwarf-Planet)	Clyde Tombaugh, 1930
Serendip	Kelvin Kepler & Artemis

CHAPTER 1.

The trumpet's blast had just sounded when the cannons crashed, once, twice, their deafening roar shaking the ground Kelvin stood on. The drums added their rattling beat to the cacophony and Kelvin waved his arms above his head as if to ward off the swarm of bullets. He pushed a shock of red hair from his eyes, the sweat pouring from his high forehead over his freckled face. He stared at the youthful figure facing him with legs braced, weapon in hand, a look of exultation on the familiar face. This was the moment of truth. He raised both arms to gather his forces for the final assault. He swept his arms down to command the cannons to fire again. Then...

The phone rang.

"Oh, Tycho Blaah!" Kelvin Kepler cursed. The tear-away genius astronomer stepped back from the full length mirror to which he had been conducting the 1812 Overture and pressed the pause button on his CD player. 200 watts of French-Russian warfare went on hold. Peace descended on Bawley Point once more. "That'll be the phone, Artemis," he called.

"I'll be bubble headed butler," Artemis mumbled in his microchips and rolled across the lino to the Bat-phone on the mantelpiece, next to Beethoven's bust. He lifted the phone to his ear and adopted his best 'Alfred' voice. "Hello. Wayne Mansion."

"Hullo? Who's that?" the puzzled voice at the other end of the line asked.

"Artemis."

"Artemis who?"

"Not who. What!"

"What?"

"Correct. I am a what, not a who. I assure you that if I was a who, I wouldn't be standing here rewiring my second hard drive, while mentally computing the orbit of Jupiter's sixty fourth moon on the other and talking to you in this ridiculous butler voice on a cheap bat-phone. And while on that subject, who am I talking to?"

"Not who. Whom." The mysterious voice corrected him.

Artemis digested this for a billionth of a second. "Are you a robot too?"

Kelvin came and stood in the doorway, polishing his conductor's baton. "Who's that on the phone, Artemis?"

"It's a Mister Whom, boss."

The tinny voice shouted from the phone earpiece. "Not Mister, it's Doctor."

"Sorree! It's Doctor Whom, minus, I hope, the Daleks." Without warning, Artemis tossed the phone across to Kelvin. "Think quick."

Kelvin deftly caught the phone and brought the baton to his ear. "Hello?"

"You'll find it hard to conduct a conversation with that, KK. I suggest you use the phone," Artemis said.

"Smartie. I'll program some respect into you one day." He put the bat-phone to his ear. "Hello, Kelvin here."

"Thank goodness. I thought I was talking to a lunatic. Who was that...Artemis?"

"Gyrating galaxies, it's you Sir Bernard." Kelvin smiled in recognition of the voice, despite an irritating, persistent knocking sound over the phone. Sir Doctor Bernard Stargazer, President of the Australian Astronomers League, was an old friend of the Kepler family and had influenced the young Kelvin to take up astronomy for a career. Not that Kelvin had needed much influencing. Having a world famous cosmologist, Dr Edwin Kepler, as his father made it natural for Kelvin to get work experience at Siding Spring Observatory on a Christmas school holiday. When a staff member gave Kelvin the boring job of refilling old photographic plates, Kelvin spent time studying them and discovered two overlooked asteroids, one comet and two supernovae. Sir Bernard was so impressed he took Kelvin off the filing to spend valuable time on the 3.9 metre telescope, much to other astronomers' horror. But the horror soon turned to praise as more new discoveries were made. It was clear Kelvin was destined to be a great astronomer. And he was only sixteen.

"That was Artemis, Sir. He's my..." Kelvin stopped. Artemis was leaning against the mantelpiece, idly nudging Beethoven's bust closer to the edge, watching Kelvin with a mischievous smile on his silicon lips.

"Go on, KK. He's my...?" Artemis prompted him.

"He's my friend and companion, Sir. You've met him before."

If busts could breath, Beethoven's let out a big one.

"Can't say I recall the chap. And he sounds the type of person I certainly would remember." Sir Bernard may be getting on in years, but his memory was still as sharp as a razor.

"That may be because at that time he was a DEC 9900 super computer as big as a bus. He looks a little different now," Kelvin explained.

A lot different, Kelvin thought. He looks passably human. Tall, like a basketball player. Okay, a very tall basketball player. And chunky, like a rugby player. Yes, a flat nosed, cauliflower eared, ugly front rower. But human. In the dark with the light behind him, maybe, but human. Ignore the roller skates with retractable wheels and switchable magnets for feet, the photo-electric cells for eyes, the micro woofer/tweeter surrounded by silicon chip lips for a mouth, the antennae for ears, the six multi jointed fingers on each hand, and an infuriating habit of always being right - not just right, but absolutely, to the smallest detail, positively correct - and yes, he would pass for human.

"In your dreams, KK," Kelvin sighed.

"What's that, Kelvin? He's your friend? You just said he is a computer." The knocking noise was getting quite loud now.

"He is, Sir... he just gives new meaning to the term user friendly." Kelvin gave the bat-phone a quick shake. "There's a strange noise on the line. Can you hear it?"

"Can't hear a bally thing over my knees. They're driving me bonkers."

"What are they doing?"

"They're knocking like a pair of castanets. Can't you hear them?" Sir Bernard was getting agitated.

"Sir Bernard... why are your knees knocking like that?" Kelvin suspected he didn't really want to know the answer.

"Why, it's your asteroid of course. Why else should I be ringing you? And it's bally cold up here, I can tell you that." Now Sir Bernard's teeth were beginning to chatter in counter rhythm, giving a weird calypso beat.

That stopped Kelvin for a second. Sir Bernard was ringing from an asteroid, somewhere between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter? That would be cold. No, he couldn't be. "You're on my asteroid, you said?" Like Beethoven's bust before, Kelvin held his breath.

"Ha! Not exactly on it, young fellow. But as good as. I can see it perfectly from here."

"And where exactly is here, Sir Bernard." Kelvin started to breath again.

"Why, up in the prime focus bucket of the 150 incher. Where did you think I was, on the Moon?" Sir Bernard started to chuckle, adding to the peculiar percussion effect of his knees and teeth.

"Oh, yes, something like that." Kelvin winked at Artemis who had finished the rewiring of his disc drive and was screwing the cover plate back onto his broad chest. Actually, it was the repaired bonnet of an old FB Holden, but Artemis liked to think of it as his chest. "So, how is it at Siding Spring?" Kelvin asked, glad that he had finally learned that Sir Bernard was not in space, but in fact ten metres in the air at the top of the Anglo-Australian Telescope at Siding Spring, near Coonabarabran. Old fashioned as he was, Sir Bernard still liked to call the 3.9 metre mirror the 150 incher.

"Bally cold, and getting ballier colder, Kelvin. Listen, the reason I called you from the bucket is that I'm too excited to wait till I get down. You were right."

“Was it ever in doubt?” Kelvin said, surprised.

“Not everyone in the profession shared your confidence. Bruno Fausthoffer for example.”

“Well, we all know about Doctor Fausthoffer,” Kelvin said. “If there was a planet made of snake oil, Bruno would find it. He’s a disgrace to astronomy. He...”

“Kelvin, I can feel your heat from up here, and it’s stopped my knees from knocking. But about your diamond,” Sir Bernard jumped in quickly, wanting to end the call so he could return to the ground and warmth.

“You mean my asteroid?” Kelvin corrected him.

“I said, and I meant, young man... your diamond.”

“Copernicus on cartwheels!” Kelvin let out a whoop and punched a fist in the air like a golfer who had just sunk a twenty metre putt - something Kelvin had never been able to do. “Yes! Yes!” Then he gave a victory thumbs up to Artemis, who rolled towards the kitchen and returned with a magnum of Cola and two champagne flutes.

“I still don’t know how you did it, young fellow, but that asteroid is right, smack plumb, where you predicted and...” Sir Bernard still couldn’t believe what his eyes told him... “just like you said, it’s totally made of diamond. One single diamond, as big as Ayers Rock. Your prediction was a beauty.”

“Yes,” Kelvin agreed modestly, “it was a gem”. Artemis groaned.

“And Bruno had said your prediction was a farce, that you’d end up with egg on your face,” Sir Bernard reminded Kelvin.

“Well, the yoke’s on him, it seems,” Kelvin said sadly, to another groan from Artemis. Sadly, because beneath it all, Kelvin felt a touch of pity for Doctor (doctor of what, nobody knew) Bruno Fausthoffer, bent astronomer.

The man only had himself to blame for his sorry situation. A nasty specimen by nature, he had aggravated people’s dislike of him by pulling one of the biggest frauds in astronomy since Mr Spock’s plastic ears. Unfortunately for Fausthoffer, Kelvin hadn’t fallen for the scam and provided proof of his treachery.

Kelvin exposed Fausthoffer during a confrontation on ‘60 Minutes’, and sixty minutes later, Fausthoffer found himself totally disgraced and expelled from every astronomical association in the world, even those he didn’t belong to.

Bruno Fausthoffer’s only legacy from the shameful episode was to get his name entrenched in the English language, both in slang and officially. A Bruno became a popular alternative for a Furphy to describe a false rumour, and the Revised Macquarie Dictionary included a new entry:

‘Fausthoffer - n. an act of gross worldwide deception; vb. to trick a large number of otherwise intelligent people by using an astronomical amount of gall.’

In addition, the bent Doctor was left with an abiding aim to destroy and disgrace one person in the whole world. Namely, Kelvin Kepler.

Yet, despite all this, Kelvin felt pity for the man. Beneath his ugly, snarling, deceitful exterior, Fausthoffer was a genius in his own way. After all he had been able to fool half the world, including most astronomers. Here was a man who wanted recognition desperately, but had no idea how to do it honestly. And probably never would.

Sir Bernard’s chattering teeth broke into Kelvin’s thoughts. “Your parents will be very proud, when they hear of it. Where are they these days, by the way?”

“Last I heard from them, they were leading an expedition up the Congo, something to do with a long lost tribe of pygmies,” Kelvin replied.

“That’s your father,” Sir Bernard mused. “Going from the immensity of the universe to the smallest of humans.”

“The way Dad explained it when they left me in your guardianship, the universe is getting bigger every day and there always will be new wonders to explore, but our world’s getting smaller and he wants to make new discoveries down here while there is something new left to discover.”

“Well,” said Sir Bernard, “at least with Elizabeth’s, your Mum’s, brain surgeon skills, he should be okay if he gets whacked on the head with a wolla wolla, or whatever it is the pygmies use.”

“I think it’s poison arrows, Sir, but I get your point,” Kelvin chuckled. He had a strong affection for his guardian. As old fashioned as he was in the ways of astronomy, Sir Bernard gave Kelvin his independence to live alone at the Kepler’s New South Wales south coast family home, knowing that Kelvin would always contact him if he got into any trouble, and being the child genius that he was, that was unlikely to happen.

Sir Bernard broke into Kelvin’s thoughts again. “This achievement will be the jewel in your crown.”

Kelvin had never considered wearing a crown but he knew what Sir Bernard meant. Having discovered a sackful of supernovas, a cupboardful of comets (real ones), a gaggle of galaxies and now this solid diamond asteroid, Kelvin’s reputation in the field of astronomy was assured.

“Yes, Sir. It will be a hard act to follow. As Isaac Newton said to the apple, it may be all downhill from here.” Kelvin felt a sudden lack of direction. What was he going to do next? What was there left to discover?

“Nonsense,” Sir Bernard snorted. “All you need is a holiday. Those long hours at the telescope have tired your brain.” He sneezed violently. “That’s it, I’m getting down from here. I almost blew myself out of the bucket. Take my advice, lad. Do something completely different for a while”

“What? No astronomy?” Kelvin protested.

“Anything but! Don’t even look at the sky. The stars have been there for billions of years. They’re not going anywhere,” Sir Bernard said and hung up half way through a super-nova of a sneeze. “Archo...” Click.

“Well, actually, they are going somewhere, and very fast. The Big Bang theory...” Kelvin suddenly realised he was talking to a dead line. “Think quick.” He threw the bat-phone to Artemis, who at that time was scanning the local paper, ten pages per second.

Artemis snagged the phone with one hand without breaking his scanning speed. “Ta. So, what are you going to do, KK?” He flicked through the paper again and found the recreation section. “Something different. Look, what about painting?”

“No, I’ll give that the brush,” Kelvin replied.

“Scuba diving, maybe?”

“No, tanks.” Kelvin chuckled.

“What about giving pottery a spin?” Artemis waited for a reply, caught the conductor’s baton Kelvin had thrown at him, and tried one more time. “Here’s the very thing. Meditation.”

“Hmm, I’d have to think about that.” Kelvin scratched his red thatch of hair. “Come on, Artemis. What could be more different than the study of the universe, the stars, the planets?”

“This.” Artemis handed Kelvin the local paper, pointing to the open page.

Kelvin stared at the page, puzzled. “You’re kidding me, right?” He read aloud from the paper. “It says here... ‘More reports have come in from as far as Batemans Bay and Bewong of a mysterious object seen in the sky... blah blah... strange humming noise... blah blah... Fred whatsisname said it looked like a flying saucer... more blah blah...’. Oh really, Artemis, why should I be interested in this UFO rubbish? Even if they existed... which they don’t... why would little green men be interested in our quiet coastal towns?”

“Not that, KK, near the bottom.”

Kelvin scanned further down, past the ad for Perkins Perfect Pilchards to a community notice.

**MONSTER MARKETS AT ULLADULLA SHOWGROUND.
STALLS, RIDES, HAMBURGERS, DEVONSHIRE TEAS.
SATURDAY 9.00AM TO 5.00PM.**

“You don’t get more down to earth than that,” Artemis promised. “I know.”

“But you’re a robot,” Kelvin reminded him.

“Yes, and I’m never wrong. Who knows, your future destiny may be found in a scone with jam and cream.” And with that gem of wisdom, Artemis rolled to the nearest corner in the lounge room, plugged into the power point, and turned himself off for the night.

CHAPTER 2

Next morning, at the first ray of sunlight, Artemis booted himself up, checked his discs for viruses, then searched the house for monsters. It was a large house so the search took over half an hour. Finally, he was satisfied. No monsters. Not today.

Having watched every science fiction movie made since the 1940s, Artemis was fully aware that the alien spaceships always arrived at night, just over the next sand hill. Then, while the unsuspecting hero slept, they snuck into the house and hid where least suspected. He had never been able to convince Kelvin of this, but Kelvin was human, and therefore not perfect.

At exactly 7.00 a.m, Kelvin’s alarm clock CD went off. “DA DA DA DUMMM! DA DA DA DUMMMMMMM!” Even the Beethoven bust tried to cover its ears with non-existent hands. It was sure it hadn’t written those famous notes so loud.

The symphony continued as Kelvin conducted his way to the bathroom, where he shaved his timidly emerging ginger whiskers. Then to the kitchen for a quick breakfast. After a bowl of Coco-Classics (Kelvin wasn’t really into the Pops), his baton expertly skewered the toast as it launched out of the toaster but never lost a beat.

“Jumping Jupiter! What a beautiful day,” Kelvin exclaimed through a mouthful of toast and Vegemite. He looked out of the front window, across the sprawling lawn and over the expanse of eucalypts below his high hilltop house, towards the sparkling blue Pacific Ocean, a push bike ride away. “I think a quick surf is in order, Artemis.” Kelvin strode from the kitchen and returned with a surfboard under his arm.

Artemis looked at the board. It was painted a deep velvet-purple and generously decorated with every kind of star, planet, comet and galaxy that could squeeze onto the surface. He shook his head sadly. “No, don’t tell me. Let me guess. You’re a ... plumber.”

“Very funny. Ha Ha! It’s just that even when I am shooting a wave, I want to be close to the stars,” Kelvin explained.

“The way you surf, all you’ll be close to will be the Big Dumper.”

“Not Dumper,” Kelvin corrected him. “Dipper. Big Dipper.”

“Dipper, Dumper. Either way, you’ll end up with a bucket of water up your nose.”

Kelvin laughed at the thought. “Admit it, Artemis, you’re just jealous.”

“Jealous? Well, I’ll be an Addle Plated Aardvark! I didn’t know I had a jealousy chip in me. And what, pray tell, Dr Frankenstein, am I jealous of?”

Kelvin was rummaging under the sofa for his towel and togs. “Point number one - jealous of being made of metal and not able to swim in salt water. Aha!” Kelvin victoriously threw his togs over his shoulder and burrowed further under the sofa for his towel. “Point number two - Dr Frankenstein, to whom you must admit I bear no resemblance – I’m much taller and better looking for starters - and Addle Plated Aardvark come from different movies – don’t mix your moviephors.”

“I’ll mix...” Artemis started to protest.

“And while you’re on Lost in Space again, how come we’re back to Addle Plated whasit? You were up to a Wobbly Weather Vane last self-insult.” Kelvin threw aside a box of well worn Phantom comics and dug deeper under the sofa.

"Yes, well the other day, while computing your diamond asteroid orbit - all that number crunching can be such a bore, you know, even for a brilliant..."

"...and modest," Kelvin added.

"...and modest bucket of chips like myself," Artemis continued, ignoring the interruption, "I watched my complete collection of Lost in Space episodes..."

"What! All one hundred of them?" Kelvin was now completely under the sofa, with only his size twelve slippers showing.

"Well, I viewed them on fast forward." Artemis gave his best electronic imitation of a sniff, and continued. "I realised I hadn't used all of Doctor Smith's insults to the Robot, which I had been using alphabetically, so I decided to start again."

Kelvin groaned from the depths of the sofa. Then he started to wiggle his way backwards. "Wait a minute. At Aardvark? I don't remember that insult."

"Well, actually" Artemis inflated his chest with pride, "I made that up myself. I got the idea from..."

"The encyclopaedia. I know," Kelvin interrupted.

"...the Yellow Pages" Artemis ended. "You'd be surprised how many companies there are out there named Aardvark. Anyway, just because Doctor Smith missed it doesn't mean I have to."

"Marvellous!" Kelvin was almost free from the sofa's grasp now. "When can I look forward to 'You Blithering Booby'?"

"Any day now," Artemis said with relish. "That's my favourite."

"Speaking of any day," Kelvin's head emerged and he waved a purple beach towel in the air, "I'm going to hit the surf at Bawley Beach."

"You'll have to waive the waves this morning, KK, if you want to get the early bargains at the Ulladulla market." Artemis enjoyed distracting Kelvin from the surf. If he couldn't swim in all that rusting salt water, then why should Kelvin have all the fun?

"Later, Artemis. It goes to 5 p.m. you said." Kelvin gazed longingly out to the rolling surf.

"But not the really juicy bargains. The dealers come in early and snap up the good stuff faster than you could say Animated Automaton," Artemis said.

"But I wouldn't say that," Kelvin pointed out.

"Oh, alright! Great Suffering Satellites then. The point is, we've got to get there early to get the good stuff."

"And what kind of stuff do you have in mind, Artemis?" Kelvin asked as he reluctantly shoved his towel and togs back under the sofa, followed by the Phantom comics and his surf board.

"Well, in this Market flyer I have here..." Artemis held up a garish orange sheet and scanned it... "they are selling some computer accessories which would add to my collection nicely."

"Oh? I wouldn't have thought they'd be selling high tech gear at a country market," Kelvin said.

"Look. Under the Sweets Stall, they're selling Toffee Apples and Ice Cream Clones! Artemis scratched some imaginary dandruff from his metal skull. "I don't know those particular models, but I'm sure I could use them."

Kelvin stared at his robot friend, uncertain whether to burst his bubble now or at the market. Now, he decided, would be kinder. "Are you sure it says Clones, or just Cones?" he asked gently. "It makes a difference."

Artemis refocussed on the flyer. "Yes, there is a printing error. It says Cones, but of course there should be an L in there. Come on, KK, let's hit warp speed. We have greedy Klingons to beat to the treasure."

CHAPTER 3

Kelvin and Artemis enjoyed the balmy sunshine as they cruised across the estuary bridge at Burrill Lakes, on the way to the lazy fishing and holiday township of Ulladulla. Artemis's Arnie Swashnagger facemask, dark sunglasses and leather jacket caught numerous stares from the fishermen on the bridge, which pleased Artemis's ego chips no end. He enjoyed dressing up, saying it made his huge frame and metal body less frightening to other people. The real reason, Kelvin suspected, was that it gave him a chance to play the parts of his heroes in all the movies he had absorbed. As to being less frightening, Kelvin had his doubts. During this trip over the bridge, Kelvin had seen three fishermen leap over the railing into the water, and they weren't at the bridge's end yet.

Kelvin drove the car. This was partly because Kelvin enjoyed driving - it was the next best thing to looking through a telescope, he would say - and partly because Artemis didn't have a driver's licence. In fact, it was mostly because of that. Kelvin had a license because, as a child prodigy, the authorities realised he could drive better than most adults.

Artemis didn't have a driver's licence because he couldn't get a Learner's Permit. There were two reasons for that. One - he was so tall, they couldn't take his picture for the Permit Photo-ID and, two - no matter how many times he took the theory test, he would not agree that roundabouts should be driven around, not over. After all, he would say, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line - why not use it?

So Kelvin drove the car.

Kelvin was very proud of his car. He'd made it himself, with a little help from General Motors Holden. In fact it was made from a Holden, Model KK. The only one in Australia. Or the world for that matter. And Holden didn't even know it existed.

After the EK model, Holden had experimented with a new secret model, the KK, producing only two cars, before sanity restored itself and they destroyed the designs and went on to make the popular FJ model.

The KK model was too heavy, and though Kelvin would never admit it, very ugly. It was a stinker. While scavenging in the scrap yards for parts to build Artemis, Kelvin had discovered the bodies of both KK prototypes, slowly rusting their secret lives away. He bought them from the delighted scrap merchant, and with a little ingenuity and a lot of welding, he joined both bodies and engines together to create his own unique car, Kelvin's KK. He affectionately called it Triple-K.

To describe the Triple-K in one word? Chunky.

It had to be, to carry Kelvin and Artemis around Australia, with Kelvin's portable observatory. The rear passenger seat had an extra high ceiling to fit Artemis's head in, and the observatory with its large round metal dome looked like a travelling igloo parked on the truck's back. The four back wheels had come from a farm tractor, and the double engine was strong enough to tow an army tank out of the mud. But it got Kelvin...and Artemis, and his telescope Isaac (named after Isaac Newton, the discoverer of gravity and apples which only fell down) ...there and back, so Kelvin treated Triple-K as family.

It was 8 a.m. when Kelvin parked Triple-K in two spare spaces at the Ulladulla Showground car park. The Showground was already bustling with stall holders stocking up their brightly decorated tables with goods while hopeful bargain hunters sorted through the stalls' contents, sometimes snatching the goods from the stall holder's hands before they touched the tables.

Kelvin had just applied Triple-K's hand-brake when his mobile phone trilled the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

"Hello, Kelvin here," he answered.

"Hi, Kelv, congratulations," a female voice said.

"Hiya Cinth," Kelvin replied, "and thanks. When did you find out?"

"Oh, us reporters never sleep, remember, or we get scooped. That asteroid of yours will have my by-line on tomorrow's front page."

Kelvin smiled at that. Hyacinth Rose was a year older than him and a trainee reporter at the Coonabarabran Crier. They had met when Kelvin was doing his work experience and had become good friends.

"Well, congrats to you too. They say diamonds are a girl's best friend," Kelvin quipped.

"Too right. Kelv, when will I... we see you again?"

"You never know. At the moment I have a new project."

"Which is...?" Hyacinth prompted.

"To introduce Artemis to Devonshire Tea."

"Ha! How is that bumbling bucket of bolts? Found any Martians yet?"

"I'll tell him you said that."

"Don't you dare," laughed Hyacinth. "Anyhow, congrats again. I'd better get back to writing up my scoop. Clear skies, Kelv."

"Onwards and upwards, Cinth," Kelvin completed their little routine and signed off. He looked up and caught a smile on Artemis's lips. "What?"

"Nothing. It's time for this bucket of bolts to bumble out of here." Artemis unwound his long frame from Triple-K's passenger seat, stretched and pumped oil into his stiff joints. "Ah, the roar of the greasepaint, the smell of the crowd," he misquoted.

"That's a circus," Kelvin said.

"Circuses, markets. Same thing. It's all a great spectacle," Artemis said. His philosophy chip was at full throttle this morning.

"Speaking of spectacles," Kelvin said, "did you have to dress like that?"

"Like what?" Artemis checked the angle of his sunglasses in Triple-K's side mirror.

"Like a cross between the Fonz and Hermann Munster. It's...it's bizarre."

"Why, thanks KK. I should fit into the market perfectly."

"Oh, come on." Kelvin led the way towards the busy circle of stalls. "And behave yourself. You're supposed to be human, not a robot. We don't want to frighten people."

Artemis retracted his foot wheels and started walking after Kelvin. His knee-joints whirred like milkshake blenders with each step, and the ground shook under his weight. His head moved rhythmically from side to side and his eyes glowed like dull red coals through his tinted sunglasses. "Me, frighten them? No problemo!" Artemis said.

The market was a kaleidoscope of colours. There was a large circle of tables around the inside of the showground racetrack. Each was festooned with streamers, flags or balloons - sometimes all three - hanging from brightly coloured tarpaulins or makeshift sun shelters. The stalls were selling goods of every kind and description. Pottery, wooden toys, blown glass ornaments, windmill hats, carved driftwood, 3D posters, leather boots, Chinese sign painting, second hand books, silhouette portraits, Zen meditation tapes. It was all there. And more. Much more. The stall holders, wearing every kind of ridiculous hat imaginable, were either calling to passers by, enticing them to look and buy, or sitting indifferently, reading books or playing solitaire, daring would-be customers to disturb their peace.

Inside the circle of tables were bright marquees, large and small, offering entertainment or refreshments, as well as a cool escape from the warm sun.

Kelvin and Artemis agreed to separate and explore the stalls alone. Kelvin gave his friend twenty dollars to spend and told him to meet at the Devonshire tea tent in one hour.

"Twenty dollars?" Artemis looked at the blue plastic slip in his hand. "You expect me to buy high tech computer gear for a paltry twenty dollars?"

"Believe me, Artemis," Kelvin said, holding back a laugh with great difficulty, "that will buy you more Toffee Apples and Ice Cream...Clones, than you could possibly eat."

"Puh...lease," Artemis snorted through his clenched mouth grille. "What do you take me for? A cannibal?" Artemis turned to go, digging a large divot in the grass as he did.

"Oh, and Artemis," Kelvin called after him. "Keep off the inflated castle."

"Well, I'll be a Bouncing Bumpkin, I'm no child," Artemis said under his breath. "No, the Super Slide is more my style. Orbiting speed, Mr Sulu." And Artemis started his clockwise trip around the circle of tables, watching for bargains, and keeping a wary eye open for raiding Klingons.

Kelvin watched Artemis go. He felt a pride at building such an electronic marvel, affection for a dear friend - it was difficult not to love the great hulking lump - and a certain nervousness as to how he would behave in a crowd of strangers. He had never let Artemis wander by himself before. But, there has to be a first time for everything.

He need not have worried. He could see people quickly springing out of Artemis's path, looking up at his tall figure as he passed. Some dived for cover. Others produced autograph books which they waved as they chased the celebrity. He'll be alright. "No problemo!" Kelvin thought aloud, wondering where he had heard that.

As Kelvin ambled along the line of stalls, he realised Artemis had been right. This was a complete escape from work. No way would he think about astronomy in this jumble of art, craft and junk. Escape, he thought. Alright, Kelvin decided, let's do it right. No more Kelvin Kepler, genius child prodigy astronomer. I'm just Kelvin, local lad looking for fun and a bargain.

Kelvin charged into the spirit of the markets, trying on ridiculous straw hats (one of which he bought, a wide brimmed sombrero, with peacock feathers jutting from the band), rummaging through boxes of pre-loved tools for something he might use on Triple-K, buying chocolate crackles and stick-jaw toffees. He bought the largest size he could of a gaudy orange and purple tee-shirt emblazoned with "LIFE'S NOT DULLA AT THE ULLA" and tried his hand at the Knock-em-Down tent.

It didn't take Kelvin long to predict the weird path of the googly balls. The Knock-em-Down man, a gorilla shaped bkie with spark plugs for ear rings and a large red-back spider tattooed on his bald head, told Kelvin to 'beat it' (at least, that's what Kelvin hoped he'd said) after Kelvin had knocked them down three times in a row and had won three of the main prizes. Giant Koala dolls.

Kelvin staggered away with the dolls, unable to see where he was going. He was thinking about turning around to walk backwards while looking over his shoulder when he suddenly bumped into something.

"Watch my coffee, mate."

Make that 'someone'.

"Sorry," Kelvin said. "I couldn't see for these Koalas."

"Well, you ought to..." the man started to complain.

"Oh, daddy, buy us the dolls. Please," a young voice interrupted him.

"Yes, please." Another voice.

"Yes, please." And yet another.

Kelvin peered around the furry head of a Koala doll to see three young children, identical except for the locations of ice-cream smudges on their faces, tugging hard on their dad's trouser pants.

The man looked at his children, sighed in defeat and put his hand in his pocket. "How much for the dolls?" he asked.

"Well, they're not really for..." Kelvin started to explain.

"C'mon mate, I don't have all day. Five dollars?"

"Five?" Kelvin wasn't certain he wanted to sell the dolls. At least not all of them. Maybe he'd keep one for Hyacinth.

"Alright, ten dollars. But no more than that."

While Kelvin was puzzling what he should do, the man pushed three crumpled ten dollar notes into Kelvin's hand and took the three Koalas, giving one to each of his children.

"You drive a hard bargain, mate," the man said. "C'mon kids, before he tries to sell us that ridiculous hat too."

Kelvin watched the man go. "Interesting," he thought. "What am I going to do with thirty dollars?"

It was then that Kelvin saw the Book Stall.

CHAPTER 4

The thirty dollars was as good as spent. Kelvin could no more walk past a bookstall than a politician could walk past a baby without kissing it. Bookstalls, especially ones laden with old and dusty books, were to Kelvin what peanuts were to elephants.

"Books," Kelvin said, and like a man possessed, a zombie without any will of its own, he strode towards the bookstall.

The stall consisted of three large trestle tables, each supported by strong metal frames beneath each end. They had to be strong because each trestle was piled high with boxes of books, causing the trestles to sag dangerously in the middle. They formed a U-shape, and in the middle of the U stood the owners of the stall, a man and a woman. Behind them, a large painted banner proudly proclaimed:

REEFE'S BOOKS

BOOKS OF ALL AGES FOR ALL AGES

The woman was small, wiry, with eyes hidden behind a large pair of glasses with lenses as thick as the bottom of a peanut butter jar. She looked old enough to be Kelvin's grandmother, but her smile made her seem as young as yesterday. Clipped to her floral pink blouse was a name-tag. "CORAL," it said. She was busy re-sorting the books into piles on one of the trestles, after her customer, a strange small man with a shock of blond baby curls under a funny hat, had jumbled through them leaving a disorganised mess.

The stall man saw Kelvin and strolled over to face him across the table. He was a large man, shorter than Kelvin, but squat like Uluru with legs. He wore a tee-shirt, more a tent than a shirt, with a book mosaic pattern, and in large letters, in case one couldn't read his name-tag, were the words **GREAT BARRY R. REEFE** spread across his huge chest.

"Can I help you, son?" the man asked, with a voice that sounded like distant thunder over the mountains.

Kelvin snapped out of a trance. Son? He wasn't sure he liked being reminded of his age, especially by his elders. "What do you have?" Kelvin asked, a little lamely he realised after it was too late.

Barry R. boomed out a laugh that knocked the top book off the nearest pile. "What do we have? Hear that Coral?" he called across to his sister who was still tidying up behind the searching customer. "What don't we have, is more like it, son", he said.

"Kelvin, Kelvin Kepler," Kelvin corrected him.

Coral's customer briefly looked up, glanced at Kelvin with a strangely blank stare, then continued rummaging through the books. "OK, Kelvin." Barry R. turned to the trestle on his right, and using his finger like the barrel of a pistol, started calling off the book categories like a racetrack announcer, as he swept around the stall.

"We have Thrillers 'n Spy 'n Mystery 'n War 'n Sci-Fi 'n Fantasy 'n Comedy 'n Movies..."

"Movies?" Kelvin interrupted.

"Sorry, dear, they're all gone." Coral smiled an apology. "Some big fellow with sunglasses and funny red eyes bought the lot."

Barry R. continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "... 'n Television 'n Sport 'n Cars 'n Planes 'n Boats 'n Pets 'n Crafts 'n Politics..."

"I really think they should go in the Comedy section, don't you Barry?" Coral asked her brother. Then turning to her customer, asked "Excuse me sir, are you going to buy something? Is there anything particular you're looking for?" The man hesitated, looked about to speak, then dived a hand into his shabby grey overcoat and pulled out a slip of paper, which he showed Coral.

"Diaries. I don't think so, sir. What kind of diaries?"

The customer, who was beginning to look familiar to Kelvin, shrugged, looked around, then pantomimed an old man on a cane, with a long, long beard.

"Old diaries?" Coral asked. The man nodded eagerly.

"Now that you mention it, I think we have a few of those lying around. Keep searching, you should find it soon. You've turned over most of our stall already." Coral braced herself to tidy up after the funny silent man.

"Hmph... 'n Cooking 'n Hobbies..." Barry continued his patter.

"Barry," Kelvin held up both his hands in surrender.

"... 'n Gardening 'n Travel 'n..."

"Astronomy!" Kelvin shouted over the machine gun delivery.

"... 'n...pardon?" Barry R. stopped in mid-word.

"Astronomy?" Kelvin asked, pointing to the stall.

"Well, you got it in one, son...Kelvin. That we don't have", Barry admitted, blushing.

"It doesn't matter, I'm supposed to be off it today, anyway. I'll just browse." Kelvin went to the part of the stall that the gun had shot as Science Fiction and started digging into the pile of books, like a pig pushing its nose into a trough of swill.

He worked his way around the table, tossing the odd book to Barry R. who started a pile for him on a chair. He had just tossed off a copy of Azimov's Foundation Trilogy when his hip struck something and a loud 'HONK' made him jump.

Kelvin turned towards the noise, to find himself staring down at the other customer, with the curly blond hair, crumpled hose-pipe hat and an old grey overcoat.

"Excuse me, did you honk?" Kelvin asked.

Barry R. and Coral Reefe exchanged puzzled glances.

"That's a bad cough you have there, mister," Barry finally said.

The customer smiled, shrugged, started whistling, stepped quickly around Kelvin, and resumed his search through the books.

Finally Kelvin decided he had bought enough. "Pity about the astronomy books," he said aloud, forgetting his vow for the day.

"What's that?" said Coral.

"I told Kelvin here we had no astronomy books," Barry said, counting Kelvin's purchases into plastic bags.

"Just a second," Coral said, pulling a dusty cardboard box from under one of the trestles. . "There's this Mystery Box I forgot to put out. I've a notion there's something to do with stars in one of the books."

"What's a Mystery Box?" Kelvin asked.

"Oh, it's like a Lucky Dip," said Barry R. "We put really old books nobody ever buys, in a sealed box, and call it a Mystery Box. If you're lucky, there may be one book you actually like in it."

"How much?"

Barry R. saw the three ten dollar notes stuffed in Kelvin's shirt pocket. "Hmmm... altogether with the others... say thirty dollars."

"Easy come, easy go," Kelvin said, paid the money and took the box and books.

"Good luck son," Barry said, then turned to help Coral tidy up the mess being generated by the other customer. "Still looking for diaries mister? Why don't you just write your own?"

CHAPTER 5

Loaded with the box and bags, Kelvin headed for the Devonshire Tea tent. He was starting to feel thirsty. Book hunting was dry work.

He turned a corner around a small brightly coloured tent, stepping carefully over the ropes and pegs, and came box to face with a small bent man wearing the craziest outfit Kelvin had seen since he last saw Artemis. The man was dressed in an ankle length red cape, a black silk shirt decorated with stars and moons, a pair of bilious yellow pantaloons and a violently green waist band. He wore a huge white turban, which almost covered his eyes, On his feet were blue shoes with long pointed toes, which turned up, just like the genie's in Kelvin's old childrens' books.

It was all Kelvin could do not to burst out laughing.

"Love your hat," the man said to Kelvin.

Kelvin did burst out laughing, then quickly developed a bad case of hiccups, which became so violent he almost dropped his books.

"Quickly," said the snappy dresser, after giving Kelvin's back three hard slaps, "come into my tent and sit down."

He led Kelvin into the tent, sat him at a small round table in the centre, and poured a glass of water.

"Thank...hic...you...hic," Kelvin gasped. Slowly, he sipped the water and took control of his breathing. "Very... hic...kind of you," he said.

"Think nothing of it," the small man said. "Tell me, do compliments about your hat always have that affect?"

Kelvin decided it best to change the subject. "This is your tent?" Kelvin took his first good look around. The inside of the tent was as brightly decorated as its owner, with tassels and curtains hanging from the roof, and layers of thick patterned carpets piled on the floor. He half expected to see a dull old lamp, waiting for a rub. "Nice," he said, noticing a strong aroma of olives and anchovies.

His host drew himself up to his full height, which came to about Kelvin's eye level while he sat at the table. "Let me introduce myself. I am Pupo the Magnificent, Seer, Palmist, Fortune Teller extraordinaire. For a small fee, I can divine your future, warn you of dangers, increase your wealth. For a slightly larger fee, I will do parties and the odd magic trick." Pupo clasped his hands and stared Kelvin in the eye. "Now, my friend with the magnificent hat, could I be of service to you, perhaps?"

"I don't think so," Kelvin said as he started to rise.

"What do you fear, Kelvin Kepler? The future?"

Kelvin sat back with a start. "Calamitous Comets! How did you know my name?"

"Pupo sees many things. Permit me, and I will see more."

Kelvin, as a scientist, had no time for fortune tellers. He suspected that Pupo was just another carnival fake. But then, he had been kind to him, and deserved some kindness in return.

"Alright," Kelvin said, placing a two dollar coin on the table, "can you tell me what's in this box?"

Kelvin placed the Mystery Box on the table, then blew the thick layer of dust off the top. The dust hit Pupo's face, causing him to sneeze violently. The turban fell over his eyes, making him look even more ridiculous.

"Sorry about that," Kelvin said.

"Don't be," said Pupo. "I saw it coming. I should have ducked."

"You saw the dust coming?" Kelvin asked.

"No, I saw that you would blow it. I am a fortune teller, remember? Now, the box." Pupo stretched out his hands, which barely escaped from his shirt sleeves. He spread his thin bony fingers and wove patterns in the air above the box, as if clearing away unseen cobwebs. He closed his eyes, mumbling quietly, while his face took on a look of intense concentration.

Kelvin waited patiently, enjoying the theatre. This is better than being dumped by a wave, he thought.

Suddenly, Pupo's left eye popped open and stared at Kelvin. "Books?"

"I told you that," Kelvin said.

"No you didn't," Pupo snapped back.

"No, I didn't either. Lucky guess. Go on." Kelvin was beginning to have second thoughts about this little old man.

Pupo's left eye stared at Kelvin a second longer, then shut again. "I see...I see..." Pupo whispered.

"Cold, is it?" Kelvin said.

Pupo's face screwed up in concentration, a trickle of sweat dropped off his nose onto his pointed chin. "Books...a book...there's a book about..." Suddenly, in mid-sentence, Pupo's voice changed. It was a woman's voice. It reminded Kelvin of his mother. Kelvin sat up straight, as if jabbed by a pin. Pupo's lips continued to move, speaking the words, but the voice seemed to come from all sides of the tent at once.

"...about my children. Hear then, you, about my children, my family, known to mortals, but again, not known."

Kelvin felt a trickle of cold sweat run down his back. Nervous novas, this is weird, he thought. Boy, Pupo puts on a good show. His eyes flicked about the tent, looking for hidden speakers, wires, but he couldn't see any. As the voice continued, Kelvin stared at Pupo, whose body had suddenly relaxed, opened his eyes, and was staring right through the back of Kelvin's head. His face now looked young, almost as young as Kelvin, and his hands, still poised above the box, glowed gently, like warm coals in a fire.

"My Children..." the voice continued.

**"My First, my closest, is both hot and cold,
My Second shines brightly, morn and evening bold,
My Third, once a gem, with clear water and sky,
Is losing its beauty, but doesn't know why.
My Fourth was once wet, but is now cold and dusty,
Its canals are dry and its land red and rusty,
My Fifth is a giant, the biggest of all,
With a cyclops red eye that never will pall
My Sixth is a beauty, about which all sing,
With a bright yellow surface, and a wonderous ring.
My Seventh and Eighth are colder than ice,
Both liquid and gassy, and not very nice.
My Ninth, Tenth and Eleventh,
And others galore,
Are midgets all scattered,
But I love them the more.
But what of my other, also a Third,
Of milk and of honey but
Of which First Third's not heard?
Unspoiled in its beauty, unseen in the sky,
Safe in its darkness, it orbits on high.
It's kept itself secret, to men on the ground,
It's hiding, it's trying...not to be found.
Beware all you seekers, be put off, deterred.
Mother's protecting her dear Second Third."**

Kelvin jumped to his feet, knocking the chair over. "Who are you? Where are you?"

"I am the Mother of my Children," the voice answered as Pupo's lips moved soundlessly.

"But who...what...are your children?" Kelvin was dashing around the tent, searching behind curtains, looking under the piled carpets. Nothing! "What is the 'other third'?"

Pupo's lips moved. **"not to be found... not to..."** The woman's voice faded, seeming to float through the tent roof and be carried away into the sounds of the market outside.

"...be found...found." Pupo's voice returned to his lips.

"Pupo!" Kelvin shook the fortune teller gently by the shoulder.

Pupo's eyes shut, then blinked furiously, as if trying to dislodge a grain of sand. He looked about, as if seeing the tent for the first time.

"What was it you were saying about children?" Kelvin asked.

Pupo stared at Kelvin, a puzzled frown on his face. "I didn't say anything about children. I said the box had a book about..."

"Yes?"

"About planets. That's it! Or at least," Pupo thought a bit longer. "About one planet."

Kelvin was about to ask which one, but Pupo stood up unsteadily, stumbled to a corner of the tent and flopped down.

"You'll have to go. All of a sudden I'm very tired. I feel I've been a very long way and back, and I haven't been myself," Pupo said.

"Please shut the tent on the way out".

Reluctantly, Kelvin picked up his books and turned towards the exit. As he lowered the flap, Pupo called after him.

"Oh, and good luck Kelvin."

"What for?" Kelvin asked.

"In searching for...the Second Third," Pupo said. Now, why did I say that, Pupo asked himself, then fell asleep.

Kelvin was asking himself the same question as he left Pupo's tent and continued his walk to the Devonshire Tea tent.

CHAPTER 6

His thoughts about the strange happenings in Pupo's tent were interrupted by the noise of a commotion coming from the bookstall. He could hear Barry R. and Coral Reeve calling out and the sound of a horn honking, like a clown at a circus. Kelvin walked a short distance back towards the stall to see what was happening. Coral was frantically pulling at the coat tails of the funny little man with the blond curls. He was standing on top of the tables, throwing books from side to side, causing passers-by to duck the flying books. Barry R. was yelling at the man and slapping him with a large book. Each time the book connected with the coat pocket, a horn honked, adding to the farce.

The man seemed to be searching for something, and was getting upset over his failure to find it.

All of a sudden, he looked up and saw Kelvin. He saw the box Kelvin was holding, and froze. His eyes moved from the box to Kelvin's face. Their eyes locked. Kelvin could feel the eyes boring into him. Then Barry R. landed a particularly loud whack to the man's behind, which knocked him face forward into a pile of books. Coral and Barry grabbed the man, yelling all kinds of threats, and pulled him off the table.

"How sad," Kelvin thought. "I'll swear I've seen his face somewhere." Kelvin turned towards the Devonshire Tea tent. "None of my business, though. I'm here to relax."

As Kelvin entered the tent, the wonderful aroma of brewed coffee and freshly baked scones hit his senses. All the outside commotion and Pupo's strange act were forgotten. After books, Kelvin's next love was freshly ground coffee... his favourite joke was:

Customer: I say, waiter. This coffee tastes like mud.

Waiter: I'm not surprised sir. It was only ground this morning.

...and hot scones, with running butter, strawberry jam, and a large dollop of fresh cream on top. To Kelvin, if he never was to fly in space, the nearest he would get to Heaven would be a country Devonshire tea.

Kelvin scanned the tent, looking for Artemis, or a free table amongst the bustle of customers. A piercing scream split the air, causing customers to jump in their seats, and one poor man to splutter his mouthful of coffee across the table into his wife's lap.

"Kelvie! As I live and breath." A short, plump, flour speckled woman, with an apron as loud as her voice saying "SCONES AIN'T SCONES, HON" scurried between the ranks of tables and planted herself in front of Kelvin, a large pastry speckled rolling pin gripped firmly in one hand. "How are you, Kelvie?" she boomed.

Kelvin cringed. "Please, Mrs McDammott, it's Kelvin."

Another scream erupted from the scone lady, this time a scream of laughter. "Oh, Kelvie, it's Aunty Dinny, remember? You didn't call me Mrs McDammott when I changed your nappies and you'd better not start calling me that now." She waved her rolling pin under Kelvin's nose. "And you'll always be Kelvie to me."

"Yes, Aunty Dinny," Kelvin sighed, knowing when he was beaten.

"While you're visiting me," Dinny said, "why don't you stay and have a Devonshire tea?" She pulled out a chair from a vacant table and pushed Kelvin, not so gently, into it. Dinny looked around the tent. "Is that strange friend of yours... Antimouse...with you?"

"Artemis," Kelvin corrected her. "He'll join me later. Now I'd like..."

"Never could figure him out, your friend. Australian?"

"Yes. Now a nice cup of..."

"Born in Australia?" Dinny persisted.

"You could say that. Coffee, white, and a plate..."

"And he helps you with your astrology, I suppose," Dinny said.

"Astronomy," Kelvin said. "Four scones, strawberry jam..."

"That's what I said," snapped Dinny.

"No, you said astrology. I said astronomy. And lots of cream..."

"There's a difference?" Dinny asked.

Kelvin took a deep breath. He always had this problem with people who didn't understand that astrology was a silly fortune telling game, with no basis in science or fact, while astronomy was a study of the stars and planets and was an exact science. He also knew he could never convince Mrs McDammott of the difference. And, in the long run, it probably didn't matter.

"Is there a difference between your beautiful fresh and fluffy scones, and a week old rock cake?" Kelvin asked.

Dinny raised herself to full height. "I should say so."

"Well, I'll have a plate of the first, with jam and cream, and a nice cup of white coffee please, Aunt Dinny," Kelvin said, feeling pleased with himself.

"But..."

"And one for Artemis, too. Here he comes now."

Dinny swung around and saw the giant figure of Arnie Swashnagger lurching towards them. She let out a low strangling, crying noise, and with a hurried "Bye Kelvie," scurried off to the kitchen.

Artemis sat on the chair opposite Kelvin. It sank deeply into the grass, and creaked dangerously. He pointed to the box. "What's that?"

"Oh, it's a Mystery Box I bought. Only it's turning out to be a bigger mystery than I thought." Kelvin then told Artemis about the strange events in Pupo's tent.

"Well, I'll be a Blithering Blimp. A second third what?" Artemis asked.

At that moment, a young girl delivered two Devonshire teas to the table. She smiled at Kelvin, then at Artemis.

"I'm back," he rumbled in his best Swashnagger voice. The girl squealed and beat a retreat to the kitchen.

Kelvin started to open the Mystery Box. "Eat your scones, Arnie...Artemis," he said.

"Thanks, but I'm full," Artemis said. "They didn't have any computer parts left. I ended up buying some red lolly coated fruit, and ice cream in pointed waffle cups. Very filling."

"So you couldn't jam in a scone?" Kelvin chuckled, as he removed some books from the box and placed them on the table. When he'd built Artemis, he'd included a food-digestion chamber to provide back-up power and make him appear more human. Artemis's speakers could flip back to allow food into his mouth. He'd even included a taste recognition program but Artemis still surprised Kelvin with his passion for food. The junkier the better. "Now, what have we got here?" Kelvin used one hand to eat and the other to sort through the books. As he suspected, most of them were of no interest whatever. He doubted he would ever read "Flea Plagues of the 1850s" or "Bonsai for Blind Buddhists".

Kelvin had finished his scones, and was halfway through Artemis's when he pulled the last book from the box. He stopped mid-chew as a dank rotten smell struck his senses. "Rancid Rockets," he gasped, choking on a scone. "What's that pong?"

Artemis grabbed the book and placed it under his nose. His antennae ears sprang up like jacks-in-a-box. "The 'pong' is this very old mouldy book." He started to turn the fragile pages.

"Old, you said?" Kelvin was wiping the remains of jam and cream from his face. He started to sip some coffee to drown the smell.

"Very. Over three hundred and seventy years old, to be exact," Artemis said.

"Sphhhpft..." Kelvin spluttered his coffee over the table. "How can you..."

"There's a date written on the inside cover." He handed the book across to Kelvin.

Sure enough, written in a faded green ink, was the date June, 1629.

"Jovian Jellyfish." Kelvin stared at the book, while screwing up his nose. He felt its old leather cover, which was cracking and peeling off at his touch. The pages were yellow, with their edges going a greeny-blue from mould. There was no writing on the cover's front or side. Carefully, Kelvin turned to the back cover and opened it to the last page.

"Kepler," he said, quietly.

"Good boy, Kelvin," Artemis reached over and patted his head. "You know your name. Der!"

"No. This was written by my great great...goodness knows how many greats...grandfather. Johannes Kepler."

"Your great blah blah grandfather wrote all those waltzes?" Artemis said.

"You Bubble Headed Booby!" Kelvin shouted.

"Hey, I wanted to say that," Artemis protested.

"Serves you right then," Kelvin said. "No, that was Johannes Strauss. Johannes Kepler was the father of modern astronomy. And this..." Kelvin carefully turned some pages, "...is his diary."

"Does it tell us if he kissed your great blah blah grandmother on their first date?"

"No, it's full of calculations. They look like..."

"Catch that man," a voice shouted outside the tent. Suddenly, tables and chairs were flung everywhere, with customers yelling and cursing as they were covered with jam and cream and spilt coffee. A grey blur sped around the tent, while the lumbering shape of Barry R. Reeve tried to keep up. The bikie from the 'Knock -em-Down' tent was roaring like a Harley Davidson, with his gorilla length arms outstretched. Amid the confusion, the sound of a honking horn could be heard.

Suddenly the grey shape stopped in front of Kelvin and Artemis. It was the strange man from the bookstall. The face under the battered hat and blond curls looked first at Kelvin, then at the diary. His eyes opened wider than saucers. The horn bleated 'Honk! Honk! Honk!' Then the man hurled himself across the table and madly grabbed for the book.

Faster than a lizard's tongue catching a fly, Artemis snatched the diary from Kelvin's hand just as the man collided with Kelvin and knocked him flying to the floor. The bikie and Barry R. raced over and tried to catch the man, but he slipped between their legs and ran from the tent.

"After him," Barry yelled. "He wrecked my stall." Barry demolished more tables as he lumbered from the tent in chase.

Artemis easily lifted Kelvin off the floor. "Now why would Honky want this old book?" he wondered aloud, as he returned the diary to Kelvin.

Kelvin slapped his forehead. "Of course! Honky. I thought he looked familiar."

"I also thought he lived in America. What's he doing in Ulladulla?" Artemis said.

"He did seem keen to get this diary," Kelvin agreed.

"A present for Shonky, perhaps," Artemis suggested.

"Strange. They're so rich and famous, they could buy anything they wanted. Why scavenge for an old book at a fete...at Ulladulla of all places?" Kelvin found this puzzle most perplexing.

"I don't think they're as funny as Mr Smith and the Robot in Lost in Space," said Artemis, defending his idols.

"Not funny? Artemis, they're the biggest TV comedy duo in the world. Millions watch Honky and Shonky every week."

"So, why isn't everyone recognising them?" Artemis said.

"Maybe they're just impersonators... like you." Kelvin put the pongy book back in the box and sealed it. "Oh well, not my worry. Let's go home, Artemis. I need to study this book carefully. Somehow, I think it is connected to Pupo's strange prediction, and Honky... if it's really him. You know what this could mean, don't you?" Kelvin asked Artemis.

"I get to drive?"

CHAPTER 7

Triple-K drove. The traffic chips and sensors in Triple-K's control panel allowed her to steer safely all the way back to Bawley Point without a single near miss.

Artemis sulked in the back, while Kelvin sat in the driver's seat nursing the Mystery Box, aching to study the mouldy diary, oblivious to the beautiful coastal scenery passing by.

Kelvin, the star trotting astronomer, was back in orbit, and ready to blast off towards another major discovery and adventure. Because, for Kelvin Kepler, every new discovery was an adventure.

"Quick, Triple-K. Park yourself. Artemis, come on, we haven't a moment to lose." Kelvin ran into the house, hit the remote CD player button, and as Holzt's beautiful 'The Planets' filled the room, he unrolled a huge solar system chart onto the billiard table.

"Hurry up, Artemis," he called impatiently.

"I'm coming as fast as I can, Captain," Artemis said as he rolled in, carrying Kelvin's books.

"Right," said Kelvin, putting a clothes peg on his nose and taking the diary out of the box. "Let's see what grandpa Kepler has to say."

He sat on the edge of the billiard table, his long legs swinging and scuffing the carpet in excitement. Carefully he turned the fragile, crumbly pages. "It's in German," he suddenly announced.

"Ach! Das nein goot," Artemis said in appalling German.

"No matter. I can read German," Kelvin said.

"Ach! Das goot," Artemis said. "I can't."

"I can give you a German chip, if you like," Kelvin suggested.

"If it's as greasy as French Fries, no thanks."

"Listen to this," Kelvin said, and he started to translate from the diary.

"...Lunched at Das Schnapps und Schnitzel with my good friend Hans Ellengrettel from the Museum of Ancient Civilisation. He told me of a fragment of burnt parchment from Babylon which was discovered in a dig at..."

"I can't read this bit...something about...kicking bottoms? Wait on..."

"...a strange star named Nevakansneezer which shone as brightly as Venus in the middle of the night...he said the parchment gave positions of the star but they were on the camel's nose...I told Hans either he'd lost something in the translation or he'd had too much schnapps and not enough schnitzel. He got very angry and said my mother wears army boots."

"He was a sour Kraut," Artemis noted. "What did grandpappy say?"

Kelvin smiled as he read from the diary.

"I wonder how he knew that?"

"Nevakansneezer? You know what Shakespeare said?" Artemis struck a dramatic pose, one hand over his left hard drive, the other poised just below the three metre high ceiling.

"No, surprise me, oh Bumptuous Bard," Kelvin said, looking up from the diary.

“Jupiter, by any other name, would still have a red spot,” Artemis recited in his best Mr Spock voice.

“What play was that from?” Kelvin asked.

“Merchant of Venus. Act two, seen many times.”

“That’s Merchant of Venice, you metallic moron. And you made that quote up.”

“Perhaps I did. But it’s still a good one.”

Kelvin shook his head, uncertain what to think. Artemis may be right. He usually was. Did this Babylonian astronomer...what was his name?...Bottom Kicker?...mistake Jupiter, the largest and brightest of all the planets, with the exception of Venice...er, Venus...for this Nevakansneezer? Unlikely, he thought. These ancient astronomers were no dummies. They may not have known what a planet was, but they knew where they were and could tell them apart.

He removed the peg from his nose and almost fell off the billiard table from the awful smell.

“Stinking starfish. This book brings tears to my eyes.”

“Well, don’t smell it, read it,” Artemis said.

“Right...I mean...okay.” Kelvin replaced the peg, then resumed his reading.

‘...Hans is beside himself with excitement, which is not a pretty sight, he is so fat. Another scrap of papyrus, this time from the ruins of Alexandria... Tutti-Fruit...that can’t be right...Tutti...whatever..ach!’ Kelvin jumped suddenly, almost falling off the billiard table.

“Listen Artemis...crashing comets!... *‘another tale of a mysterious star, bright as Venus...named Nix-Do-Archoo...details of its position in 32 B.C.’* Now that can’t be right. *‘...from Ra’s Rump. Hans swears he is off the schnapps.’* What do you think, Artemis?”

“Definitely Jupiter. If it was anything else, why can’t we see it now? It’s not just that book that smells, KK.”

Kelvin slowly leafed through the mouldy diary. “I don’t know. Nevakansneezer, Nix-Do-Archoo. Sometimes these ancient astronomers...”

“...thought the earth was flat. C’mon KK, all that pong has clouded your head.” Artemis wheeled towards the kitchen. “Doctor Diode says what you need is an Artemis Special Popcorn Pizza.”

Kelvin turned page after page, each time having the feeling the next page would reveal a clue to the mystery. The clatter and bangs from the kitchen stopped...to be replaced by the sound of Artemis pounding dough.

Another page, another...pound, pound...then Kelvin froze. He whipped the peg off his nose, ignoring the grave-like stench. “Holy Halley’s Comet, Artemis you were right. Pizza!”

“I’m going as fast as I can, Cap’n. You’ll have to wait until it cooks,” Artemis called from the kitchen.

“No, here in the diary. Pizza.”

“Well, that’d explain the smell after 350 years.”

“Listen to this.” Kelvin’s voice took on that pitch of excitement he usually reserved for when he was conducting Beethoven or when one of his putts actually went in the hole.

‘...Dunker der biscuit und donner the blitzen. A most fantastic discovery. My grocer told me the delicious Il-Pupo olives on my pizza are named after an Italian astronomer who died recently when one of his olive trees fell on him. This struck me as odd – not as odd as it struck him, I suppose. Why give up astronomy for olive growing? I was moved to visit his widow, a Senora Galliani. She told me that Pupo would not have taken up olive growing and have been killed at the young age of 94 if it wasn’t for that cursed planet...Il-Pupo. She showed me Pupo’s old notebooks. His final entry, with measurements of Il-Pupo’s position ends with the words ‘blinked’... and ‘went away’. Then, there are pages of doodles that look like olives. Lots of olives.’

“It must be true,” Kelvin called out. “That’s three different stories about a mysterious planet. And it explains why we don’t see it now. Pupo Galliani said...” he quickly checked the diary... “in 1565 it ‘went out’. Now why would it do that?”

Artemis stuck his head out of the kitchen. His antennae ears and metal cheeks were covered in flour and dough. “Maybe it’s hiding, Cap’n.”

“Galileo’s Ghost,” Kelvin stared at the now empty cardboard box on the billiard table. That Voice! In the wacky fortune teller’s tent...wait, his name was...Pupo the Magnificent... could he..? Nah, just a coincidence...The Voice, what did it say? He squeezed his eyes shut, concentrated. Then he heard the Voice clearly in his mind.

“...It’s hiding, it’s trying...not to be found.”

Yes! Yes...and what did Pupo the Magnificent say before he went off to sleep? “...about one planet...the second third.”

At this stage Kelvin was walking in circles, faster and faster, round and round the billiard table. He knew he was on to something fantastic. He could smell it, and it wasn’t the diary. Suddenly the tent Voice’s final words leaped into his mind, and he slammed to a halt like a meteor hitting the Moon.

“...Mother’s protecting her dear Second Third.”

“That’s it. A second third Planet. Earth’s the third planet. Mars is the fourth. Could Nevakansneezer, and Nix-Do-Archoo, and Il-Pupo...could they all be the same planet? Another Third Planet?”

Artemis appeared with a pizza base covered in cheese, tomato paste and stacks of unpopped corn. “Which, if you remember this small detail, blew up in 1565.”

“No, not blew up.” Kelvin pointed to the page in the diary. “Went out.”

“An explosion, by any name, is still das kapput.”

Kelvin remembered the Voice as it spoke about her children. He could *feel* the Voice. It was no trick. Kelvin, a scientist, hard bitten and aware of the tricks of shysters like Dr Fausthoffer, knew that this was no trick.

“It’s out there, somewhere. It just doesn’t want to be seen.” He waved the diary, now completely oblivious to the putrid pong. When his brain was in gear to solve a major puzzle, he could switch off his other senses. He quickly scanned the remaining pages. Numbers. Pages and pages full of numbers. “Look, great great etcetera grand-dad has copied all the data about Nevakansneezer and Nix-Do-Archoo and Il-Pupo’s recorded positions. Here, he says... *‘one day, I’ll use this to work out the planet’s location...if it’s still there. All I have to know is where Baal’s Elbow and Isis’s beak are. And just how long is a hippos’ head? One of these days...’* But he never did. He died the next year.”

“So, it will never be found. Too bad!” Artemis rolled back to the kitchen to cook the pizza.

“Wrong! What one Kepler started, this Kepler is going to finish. Our holiday is over, Artemis. Tomorrow we go to work.”

“We? Did I detect a ‘we’ in that sentence?”

“Artemis, I didn’t give you a super computer for a brain just so you can memorise every bad gag from *Lost in Space*.” Kelvin reverently lifted his ancestor’s diary and held it under Artemis’s nose. “I am going to program this data into you, and you are going to crunch it and smunch it and grunch it and, when you have finished...,” he smoothed out the solar system map laying on the billiards table, tracing the paths of the known planets “...then we will have made the most fantastic discovery in modern history. The location of the second third planet.”

“Just one question, KK” Artemis cast his super sharp eyes over the map, measuring the challenge. “Can we eat this pizza first?”

CHAPTER 8

The air above the National Park was sharp – as sharp as the famous Bread Knife. Koalas wisely hid from gawking tourists and striding hikers as the fantastic rock formations stood like sentinels below the world famous Siding Spring Observatory.

Cows grazed contentedly around the ample base of the massive monolith called Timor Rock. A towering craggy jumble of basalt halfway between Siding Spring and the sleepy town of Coonabarabran, it looked like a half melted chocolate mud cake that had fallen from the sky.

It was another peaceful day on the Warrumbungles.

In the Warrumbungles was a totally different matter. Little did the noble Kamilaroi tribe know, when they dubbed these fantastic outcrops ‘Warrumbungles’ – the Crooked Mountains – that the name would more accurately describe its latest resident than the mountains themselves.

‘Crooked’ was a very good description for the man blowing his lolly in his lair illegally hidden deep inside Timor Rock. He was furious. Livid. Spitting. And that’s putting it mildly.

“I’ll get even, if it’s the last thing I do. I had it all – fame, fortune. I was getting rich, rich. I was getting richer than the old Kaiser himself. Then that Kepler brat ruined it. Ruined me. How dare he? HOW DARE HE!!” Dr Bruno Fausthoffer slammed both fists on his heavy wooden desk, making the framed photos of himself and old Kaiser Wilhelm jump.

“Keep your monocle on down there. You’ll bring the whole mountain down on us.” Homer Styles’s voice echoed weirdly as it bounced down the shaft that led from the top of Timor Rock to the cave hideaway at ground level.

“Mind your cheek, you gutter snipe,” Fausthoffer called up the shaft, “or I’ll hand you back to the authorities from whom I snatched you.”

A high pitched cackling sound – one would hardly call it laughter – sent the remaining bats in the crevices flapping wildly, seeking a hiding spot from the hideous noise. Most of the original bats in Timor Rock had departed when Fausthoffer and Styles first moved in. They had soon realised that the two men had enough bats in their belfries so they flew off to saner caves.

“Fat chance, Fausty. With what I have on you...face it, you need me.” Styles jumped into the small lift cage and started to come down, letting the rope out hand over hand.

“Don’t call me Fausty,” Fausthoffer screamed up the shaft. He straightened his monocle and his back. He couldn’t throw out his chest as most of it had gone to his stomach which hung over his belt. “I am Dr Bruno Fausthoffer,” he said in a calm, dignified, almost regal voice. “Astronomer extraordinaire, scholar, and distant – but not too distant – relation to the late Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany.”

Another maniacal burst of cackling greeted this. The remaining bats could take it no longer and flew out of Timor Rock into the daylight. It was almost suicidal but anything was better than that pair.

“Scholar, hah!” The lift cage was almost down. “Your PhD is for Doctor of Phoniness. And as to astronomer extraordinaire, you are to astronomy what arsenic is to cooking. Tasteless and poison!” The cage hit the cave floor with a thud, and Styles slinked out. “Face it, Fausty, you and I are a great pair.”

Fausthoffer let his monocle drop and stared at the man before him. Fausthoffer didn’t need an eyeglass. He had 20-20 vision, but the monocle suited his Prussian pride. Looking at Styles, he wished his eyesight wasn’t so good, for Homer Styles was one of the ugliest men he had ever seen.

He resembled a cross between Igor, Dr Frankenstein’s hunchbacked servant and a giant laboratory rat. The comparison with a rat was insensitive and cruel but alsoomerHomer, unfortunately, accurate.

Styles’s eyes were long and slitted - like a rat. He had a long pointy nose - like a rat. His ears were long and pointed like Star Trek’s Mr Spock - and like a rat. And he had the buckiest of buck teeth - like a rat. In a beauty contest, a rat would beat Styles every time.

Fausthoffer gave a slight shudder. “A team, perhaps. A pair? Never.” He pointed to the roof of the cave. “Did you finish it?”

Styles strode to the fridge, removed a bottle and chugged its contents in one go. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, gave a burp that echoed up the shaft, and turned to Fausthoffer. “Yep. Ready to go. It’s hidden amongst the trees up there so won’t be spotted.” He stared with beady eyes as Fausthoffer rocked to and fro in anticipation. “Boy, you really have got it in for Kepler, eh?”

“Got it in? That is a gross understatement. Did Captain Ahab have it in for Moby Dick? Did the Sheriff of Nottingham have it in for Robin Hood? After what he did to me, no revenge could be sweet enough.” Fausthoffer began to pace the cave floor. “I had shocked the world with the news that a giant comet – Comet Fausthoffer – was on a collision course for Earth. I even had photos and orbital

calculations to prove it. All totally fake, of course, but excellent quality. Then using InStarNet, you, my brilliant but bent computer hacking Homer Styles, were able to transmit my phony photos and data to all the world's observatories, convincing them that their great telescopes were actually seeing my comet. A stroke of evil genius." Fausthoffer stopped his pacing to stare at his companion. Ugly, but absolutely brilliant with computers. What a mixture. He resumed his pacing.

"I became a celebrity overnight. I was interviewed by newspapers, television. My photo was on the cover of Time Magazine..."

"And on Rolling Stone," Styles cut in. "A comet is an icy rock, after all, and in space it doesn't gather much moss."

"Yes, thank you. As I was saying, I was on all the talk shows. I was important. My fame and fortune were guaranteed." Fausthoffer started to chuckle, a deep sound like a barrel of marbles under three metres of water. "So was the general panic caused by fears of the expected collision. People all around the world heard of Comet Fausthoffer and began to spend their savings on comet repellent – my own fake invention - survival kits, tinned food, bomb shelters. Naturally, I had previously cornered all these markets and I was going to clean up on the stock exchange." Fausthoffer stopped pacing again, savouring these images, his wealth building up. Then his face turned purple in rage.

"But Kelvin Kepler..." Fausthoffer spat the name, "...wunderkind astronomer from Down Under didn't buy my story...nor my comet repellent, survival kits, tinned food or bomb shelter. No, he carried out his own observations on his own telescope which was not connected to InStarNet and found..."

"...not a large fragment of ice, but a huge figment of Fausthoffer fiction," Styles finished. "Shades of the emperor's new clothes."

"Wax lyrical if you will, Styles, but the shares in repellent, survival kits, tinned food and bomb shelters went through the floor, even deeper than the bomb shelters themselves, and I found myself bankrupt, without a brass razoo, as well as totally and utterly disgraced. Curse that dictionary."

Styles cracked the lid of another bottle. "No wonder you hate him so much. How dare he expose you to the world as the rotten crook that you are?" He raised the bottle. "So here's to revenge. Now, what's your plan?"

"Plan?"

"C'mon Fausty, you didn't get me to install that dish so you could watch Gilligan's Island re-runs. What gives, and why do I suspect it involves my special illegal hacking skills?"

"Homer, you're more than just an ugly face. My plan? We know that Kelvin's friend and mentor, the doddering old Sir Doctor Bernard Stargazer... Sir?" Fausthoffer threw his hands up in exasperation. "What did he ever do to deserve a Sir? A few brilliant discoveries about the expanding universe, the odd black hole, a new theory on Quasars, sure...but what else? It's a rotten disgrace that..."

"Fausty!" Styles cut in at the start of a long harangue he'd heard many times before from the bitter and jealous Fausthoffer. "The plan?"

"The plan is if you call me Fausty one more time, I'll put you in a rocket and shoot you to the Moon...WITHOUT A SPACESUIT!"

Styles grinned at Fausthoffer's threat. He knew Fausthoffer was so broke, he couldn't afford a fire cracker, let alone a moon rocket. That microwave dish had taken the last of his spare cash. "The plan?" he repeated.

Fausthoffer sighed in powerless exasperation. "Stargazer is based at Siding Spring, just over there. We will intercept any messages between him and Kelvin to get clues to Kelvin's current venture, whatever it is. He always has something going, rotten little genius that he is. I'll get the jump on it and get all the glory. Simple."

Styles nodded his pointed head. "You mean, steal his discovery and take all the credit, without doing any of the work?"

"Exactly!" Fausthoffer pounded the desk.

"I like it," said Styles. "You're my kind of scum bag. When do we start?"

"Right now. Hack into Sir Bernard's electronic mail and see what we get. I have a hunch Kelvin...that is, we'll...be onto a big discovery soon."

Styles sat down at his computer keyboard, stroking it affectionately. He decided to push his luck. "Um, Dr Fausthoffer, while I work, could you get me a snack?"

"Certainly, Homer," Fausthoffer smiled. "How do you like your cheese?"

Homer styles, for all his obnoxious habits and dishonesty, was a communications genius. In next to no time, he was receiving Dr Stargazer's e-mail before the old gentleman read it himself. And he was passing Dr Stargazer's replies for Kelvin Kepler to Dr Fausthoffer before Kelvin got to read them. If Styles had been honest, he would have his own software company by now and be obscenely rich. But he was ethically as bent as a banana, so was stuck with Dr Fausthoffer. How sad.

On their second day of hacking, Styles passed Fausthoffer a particularly weird message from Kelvin. "Camel's elbow, Baal's nose? I think your nemesis has finally lost it, Fausty." Styles finished off his sandwich, dropping bread crumbs and grated cheese across the dirt floor. He was bored with the sandwiches Fausthoffer was making him. Why did Fausty think he always wanted cheese? He'd ask him sometime.

"What did you say?" Fausthoffer snatched the paper from Styles's hand. He quickly scanned the message. "He's asking the old geezer if he's heard of these ancient constellations. Look...Hippo heads...that's a distance...from Isis's beak. That's an Egyptian constellation." Fausthoffer scratched his middle hair tuft in puzzlement.

"Do you understand all that animal stuff?" Styles was peering at the computer monitor as he asked.

"Yes, I used to dabble in ancient civilisations and archaeology but decided all the tombs had been robbed and there were none left to plunder. These names are how the Babylonians and Egyptians described stars in the sky." Fausthoffer shrugged. "I wonder what Kelvin is looking for."

"It might have something to do with this lost planet," Styles said, pointing to his monitor.

"What?" Fausthoffer's bushy eyebrows almost reached orbit.

"Here," Styles pointed. "Kelvin asked Dr Stargazer if he knows the modern names of these ancient constellations so he can compute the orbit of some ancient planet called Il-Pupo that went missing in 1565 A.D." Styles continued to read, oblivious to the sound of Dr Fausthoffer hitting the cave floor in a dead faint.

“He also urges Dr Stargazer to delete this message after he read it so that the historical discovery will remain secret till the planet can be located and he can announce it to the world.” Styles emitted one of his scary cackles. “I’d say his secret’s safe with us, eh Fausty.”

Silence.

“Dr Fausthoffer?”

....

The adventure continues. Will Kelvin and Artemis discover the lost second third planet? What dastardly deeds will Dr Fausthoffer do to beat him to it? What role will Pupo the Magnificent and the mysterious voice of Mother play in the drama? And who is that strange fellow Honkey... why was he looking for the diary? And has anyone seen Shonkey? Just what are they up to? And why is the second third planet hiding?

The race for the second third planet is on. How fast and far will it go? Tighten your seat belts and keep your space suits close. You will need them as Kelvin and Artemis journey to places they would never have dreamed of.

Your feedback to the author, Robert Bee, is invited on how you enjoyed this sampler. Would you like to read the rest of the novel? You can provide this feedback by using 'Contact Us' on this website, or emailing Robert directly on robertbee46@gmail.com