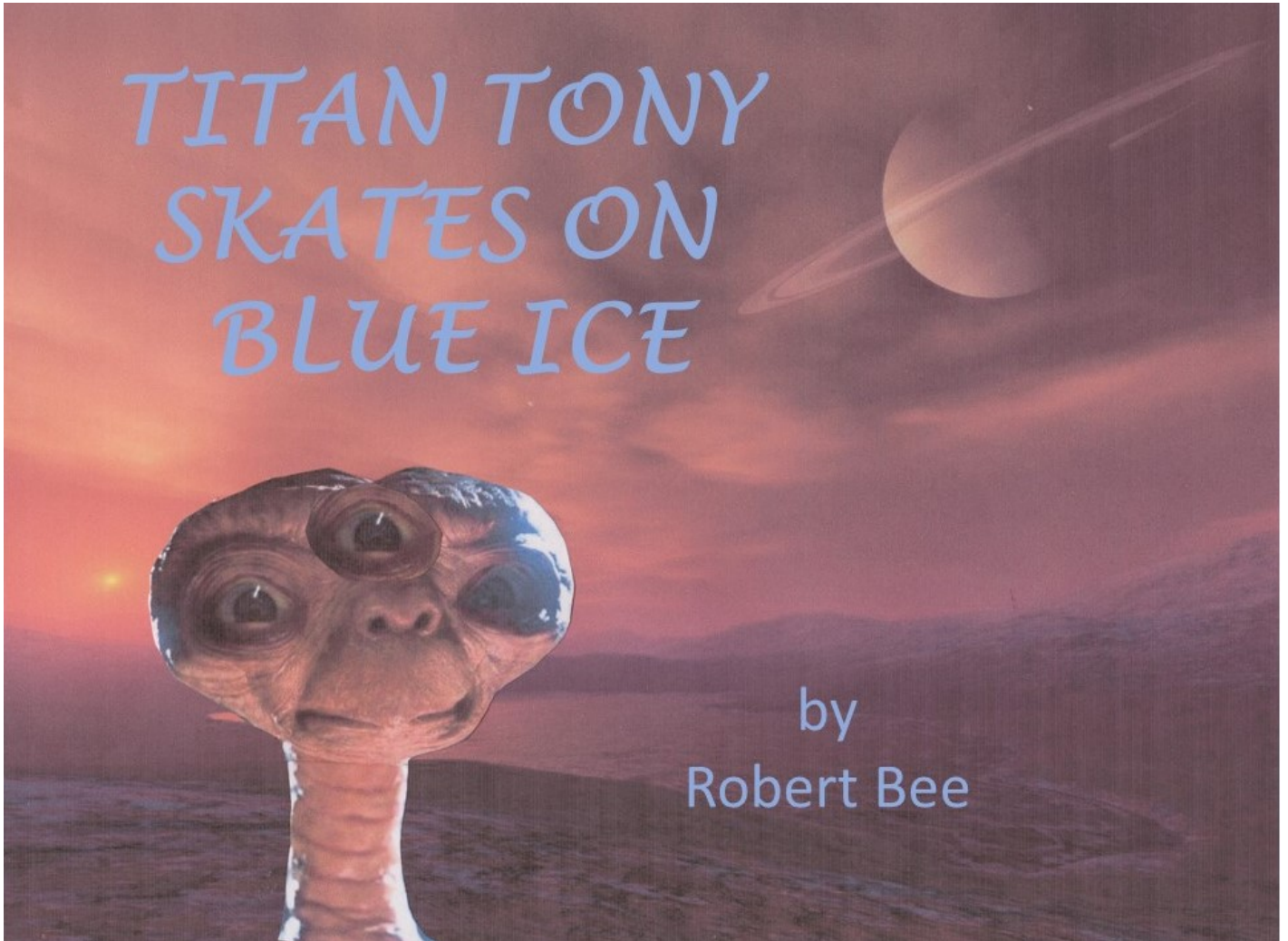


Titan Tony Skates on Blue Ice - A Young Adults Novella

TITAN TONY SKATES ON BLUE ICE

(A Young Adults' Novella - by Robert Bee)



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“Thor, drop that ball. Drop it. Thor, I’ll...” Tony Nothill watched his family dog, a huge black Labrador-Collie cross, as it grinned its stupid grin while it held the hockey ball, now moist with dog slobber, in its mouth. Thor was not going to drop the ball.

“Thor, drop it.” The deep seventeen year old voice of Tony’s eldest brother Ricky boomed across the backyard. Thor immediately dropped the ball and ran to the back fence and slinked into his kennel.

Tony ran over and gingerly picked the ball up, trying to avoid contact with the gooey slobber. “Why does he obey you and not me?” he complained.

“It’s all in the voice,” Ricky explained. “It needs to be deep, and have an air of command. You try it.”

Tony cleared his throat, then said in his lowest but loud voice, “Thor, drop it.”

“No, lower, like this.” Ricky said it again just like before. “Thor, drop it.”

Thor’s head popped out of the kennel entrance and looked hurt. Drop what? He shook off imaginary fleas and retreated to the depths of his kennel again.

Tony cleared his throat and tried once more. He and Ricky took turns to say aloud “Thor, drop it.”

“By George,” Ricky said, laughing. “I think you got it. I’ll say it, then you do it again. Thor, drop it.”

Tony puffed up his chest and copied his brother. “Thor, drop it.”

Thor’s head poked out of the kennel and looked around, confused. How could there be two Rickys all of a sudden? This was too much and he lay down and covered his head with his paws.

Ricky and Tony laughed. Poor Thor, he'll get over it. He always does.

Just then, Sam, Tony's other brother, came out of the house carrying his hockey stick. Sam was fourteen years old and played in the local Nighthawks U15s hockey team. Ricky played in the same club's U18s team while Tony who had just turned eleven, played in the club's U13s.

They were a real hockey family.

"Now we've got the ball back, can we keep practicing?" Tony said. The brothers spent as much time as they could practicing their hockey in the large backyard. Tony hoped to be selected one day for the state squad, just as Sam had. He was wearing his team shirt which his mum had told him to put in the dirty clothes box. Sure. He'll do it after he'd finished practicing this afternoon.

Tony's shirt, a dark blue like the night sky, had his name, "T. Nothill" and his team number, "11", boldly printed on the back. Tony was very proud of his shirt. One day people will want autographed copies of it, he thought. He dreamed.

The boys got down to practice, passing the orange ball backwards and forwards to each other in a triangle, each time hitting it harder and harder.

"Yikes," Tony shouted as a bullet fast pass from Ricky sizzled towards his ankle. Luckily he was able to jump up and the ball travelled under his foot, hit a brick on the ground near the barbecue and bounced up, narrowly missing the kitchen window by a smidgeon. As it was, it hit the gutter's eave and left a dark orange stain. No hole thankfully.

All the boys looked at each other. Oops! That could have been costly.

"Sorry," Ricky said. "Nice hop though Tony."

"Yeah, not so hard," Tony said. "That could have hurt."

"Oh, it would have hurt," Sam laughed. "And you would have given away a penalty corner."

"Ha ha," Tony said. "Thanks for the sympathy."

"You want to play with the big boys, you have to expect..."

Whatever Sam had been about to say was interrupted by a loud noise. At first the boys thought it was a thunderclap and they all looked up at the sky. But there were no cloud banks, no storm. Then they heard it again. It came from nearby. Very nearby. And is sounded... not like thunder but... more like... like the sound of the world's largest zipper being unzipped very quickly.

"Ziiiiiiiippppp!!!!!!!"

"Jumping Jupiter," Tony said, his eyes popping open as wide as saucers. He pointed at what had just appeared in their backyard, cutting their trampoline set clean in half. "Look at that."

'That' was a large glowing circle, about as high as their house's roof top. It looked like a fireworks Catherine wheel with pale pink glowing spiraling arms wound around its outside. The arms span round and round with a low, crackling fizzing type noise.

But in the centre... that was even weirder. It was like a large perfectly circular pale blue sheet of something. The circle was a bit taller than Ricky and it rippled and shimmered like the surface of a swimming pool in sunlight. And it gave out a low warbling sound, like a wobble board.

The boys backed off, sharing astonished looks. What on earth was this? They split up and slowly moved around each side of the now shattered trampoline, not taking their eyes off the ... thing.

"Oh my..." Sam said. He had just got halfway around and was looking at the thing side on. But there was nothing there. Or if it was, it was so thin he couldn't see it. Instead, he saw Tony and Ricky looking back at him from the other side. There was just this ultrathin pink line that seemed to be drawn down Tony's face and body. He moved his head a bit to one side. There, he could just see a hint of the pink wheel arms. Then he moved back and it was... gone again.

The boys returned to the front of the wheel and stared at it, transfixed. They were no longer scared. This was exciting.

"What is it?" Tony whispered.

"You're asking me?" Ricky said.

"I've seen something like this," Sam whispered. "In a sci-fi movie. I think it's called a ..."

"Yikes," Tony yelled. He grabbed Ricky's arm.

A figure in a... space suit...? ... had just stepped through the blue centre of the object with a soft slurping sound. The rippling surface of the centre continued undisturbed, as if the figure hadn't come through.

The figure just stood there, two arms, two legs and a large helmeted head. It was a deep blue in colour, but as the boys watched, a bluish steam rose from every part of the suit, floating up into the air and disappearing, as if blue ice was being evaporated. What was left behind was a brilliant white suit with colourful figures on it and a bowl-like helmet.

The figure slowly turned towards them, then gave a small friendly wave.

Without thinking, all three waved back. Then they gasped.

The occupant of the suit wasn't human.

Not even remotely.

The boys measured the distance to the house's back door. Could they turn and run and get safely inside before the alien blasted them with his weapon? But it didn't seem to be holding any weapon. Maybe...

Before they could decide what to do next, the alien decided for them. It spoke.

"#%^ &^% *%#@& %!?!&%" it said.

“Huh? What did it say?” Tony asked.

The alien held its hand up, as if to say ‘wait a minute.’ It twiddled a small dial on a box mounted on its suit’s chest. Then it spoke again.

“>*~%@ +?~@^\$* *\$\$>@%!*.”

Sam held both of his hands face up and shrugged. No better, he was saying.

Again the alien indicated for them to wait, twiddled the knob once more, then spoke.

“Hi, I’m Jack Chance, from Titan.”

Tony’s bum hit the ground first, since he was the shortest. But Sam and Ricky’s bums weren’t far behind.

The alien walked clumsily over and stood looking down at the boys. “Is there a problem?” it said.

For the first time, the boys were able to have close look at the alien, or at least its face. Thankfully, it didn’t look anything like the monster from the movie ‘Alien.’ Nor did it look like the bare triangular headed green or grey aliens with large lidless eyes in some of the other movies.

Tony stared at its face. He finally decided that, yes, it did look a lot like E.T. from that movie. Except for one small detail. E.T. didn’t have three eyes. Also, Tony remembered, E.T. had short stubby legs. This alien had longer legs, just as long as Tony’s.

The alien, or Jack as he had said, held out two gloved hands and helped Tony and Sam to their feet. Ricky jumped up by himself. It was then they realized how tall Jack was. Or wasn’t. He was about midway between Tony and Sam’s height. Ricky towered over him.

“How come you can talk to us?” Tony asked.

Jack pointed to the box on his chest. “Translator,” he said.

Almost as if it was the most normal thing to do in your backyard, Ricky pointed towards the shimmering circle with the still rotating spiral arms. “So, that’s yours?”

“Yes, but it won’t be for long,” Jack replied. “I must hurry.” He turned to Tony. “I have come for you, Mr Nothill, Number 11.”

“For me?” Tony said, alarmed. “What did I do?”

“It’s not anything you did, but what you can do. For us,” Jack said.

“Us?” Ricky said. “Who’s ‘us’?”

“The Titan Tigers, my team.”

“Whoa whoa,” Ricky said, holding up his hands. “The Titan Tigers? Jack, what are you talking about?”

The alien reached up and unclipped his helmet, then lifted it off his head.

“Wow,” Sam said. “Wait till I tell the kids at school.”

Tony nodded to himself. Yep, definitely a three eyed E.T. But this one doesn’t need to phone home.

“Listen closely, I can only say this once. The transportation portal...”

“It’s a portal, a portal, oh my” Ricky jumped up and down with excitement. “They exist. I can’t believe it. How...”

“Zip it, kiddo,” Jack said, pointing at Ricky, who suddenly shut up. “My portal will close very soon and I need to get back to Titan.”

“Titan?” Sam said.

“Yes, the large moon around your planet Saturn. That Titan.” He saw the three boys staring at him, open mouthed. Better, he thought. “Look, here’s the deal. We have a big hockey competition on Titan and we’ve made it into the semi-finals but our team’s star forward is injured. We need a replacement fast.” He pointed at Tony. “We chose you, one of Earth’s best hockey players.”

“What, him?” Sam and Ricky said together. “Are you kidding?” Sam added.

“We watch Earth hockey all the time,” Jack said. “And T. Nothill, Number 11” is one of the best you have.” He looked Tony over with his top third eye. “I admit, you look a bit smaller in the flesh than I thought you’d be.” He gently took Tony’s arm. “Now come, the portal is waiting. We must hurry.”

“Wait wait wait,” Ricky objected, suddenly realizing what was happening. “He’s not who you think he is.”

Jack turned Tony about and pointed at the name and number on his back. “Yes he is. See, T. Nothill. Number 11. The very one. Now, we have to go.” He started towards the gaping portal, holding Tony’s arm firmly. “Come Mr Nothill, fame awaits you.”

And before Ricky could move towards them, Jack stepped through the portal’s filmy surface taking Tony with him. They’d gone.

“But he’s Tony Nothill... Tony.” Ricky screamed at the portal. “Stupid alien. You’ve got the wrong guy. You want ...” He started running towards the portal, determined to get his brother back but was knocked flying by a flash of black fur. It was Thor, racing to rescue... or follow... his friend Tony. Thor leapt up and through the filmy surface just as there was another thundering “Ziiiiiiipppp!!!!!!”

Ricky lay sprawled on the grass as he and Sam watched the dazzling portal pop out of existence, leaving the two shattered halves of the trampoline behind. And the strands of hair from Thor’s tail tip.

Ricky stared at Sam. Sam stared back at Ricky. “I think we’d better call Mum and Dad,” Ricky said. And they both ran for the house.

Tony was holding his breath when he popped out of the portal and landed on a green tile-like surface. He was feeling very cold. He looked at his arms and legs and they were covered in a powdery pale blue frost which even now was starting to evaporate, just like when the alien popped into his backyard. Wow, he thought, that's cool, then laughed at the joke. Tony quickly looked about him, took the view in, forgot the frost and sank to his knees. This can't be happening. I'm dreaming, he thought.

Jack gave him a soft slap on the back. "You can breathe now, Mr Nothill. The air here is quite safe."

Tony took a deep breath and another look around, more carefully this time. 'Here' was the inside of what looked like a giant glass dome with lots of squat deep green buildings. And lots more aliens like Jack. He was just about to stand when something soft and furry, yet cold and blue crashed into him, bowling him over.

"What on Titan..?" Jack cried out as Thor, who had just erupted out of the portal jumped off Tony, gave a huge dog shake to throw off his layer of frost, and started licking Tony's face. Then Thor looked up, saw Jack standing there and ran to him, running and leaping around him playfully. He leaped up, trying to lick Jack's face but, amazingly, went high over Jack's head and landed slowly on the other side. Thor looked about him, wondering where Jack had got to. He turned around, saw Jack, and jumped up to lick his face again. The same thing happened. Thor looked at Tony with a 'what is going on here' expression. Then he went back to Jack, but this time with only tiny hops so he reached Jack's face each time. The alien kept pushing him away. This encouraged Thor even more, thinking he had a new playmate.

"Get it away, get it away," Jack pleaded with Tony. "What is it?"

"He's not an it, he's a dog. My dog, Thor," Tony said. Then he used the voice Ricky had taught him. "Thor, down. Down."

Thor immediately stopped jumping up on Jack and sat, staring up at him, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, a silly grin on his face.

"There's no place for dogs in this dome," Jack said. "I have to send him back." He started towards Thor.

"Please, Mr Chance," Tony pleaded. "Let him stay with me." Tony had quickly realized he didn't want to be alone with all these aliens.

Jack gestured to a pair of nearby aliens who had been watching with some amusement. At least Tony thought their facial expressions were amused. "Help me carry him to the portal."

Just as the three aliens managed to pick Thor up, Tony said: "If you send him back, I won't play for you."

"What?" Jack said, letting go of Thor in surprise. The other two aliens couldn't keep hold of the now struggling dog and dropped him. Thor ran to stand behind Tony and stared out at Jack. Jack stared back at Thor. "You can't do that. We need you."

Then Thor came out from behind Tony, walked slowly over to Jack and started to rub his side against Jack's leg, all the while looking up at him with an idiotic smile.

Jack sighed. "I can't believe I'm doing this." He reached down and started to scratch Thor behind one ear. Thor smiled even wider, then he plopped down on the ground and rolled over with all four legs up in the air, his tail wagging furiously. The invitation was obvious, even to an alien. Jack knelt down and started to scratch Thor's tummy. He was hooked. "Alright, he can stay," Jack said. Then he looked up sternly at Tony. "But you have to pick up all his poo."

"So, what's new?" Tony said, and he too went over to scratch Thor's tummy.

Soon, there was a group of aliens standing around, waiting for their turn.

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By the end of Tony's tour of the giant dome, he had started to get used to the very low gravity on Titan. At one seventh of Earth's, it was just that little bit lower than gravity on the Moon. Tony experimented with jumping and hopping and found he could go very high and very far. Also, things were nowhere near as heavy as they would be on Earth.

Tony found he could pick Thor up with very little effort but it took just as much effort to toss him across the ground. Luckily Thor landed very slowly and softly when he tried. Jack tried to explain why this was so – something to do with inertial mass - but it made Tony's head hurt. After all, he was only eleven years old and hadn't done science at school yet.

But what he did discover was this – he could throw something seven times higher and seven times further than he could on Earth and that was cool. Very cool.

"But why are you here?" Tony asked Jack as they stood on a small platform near the inner surface of the dome. It gave a sweeping view out of the dome onto the nearby surface of Titan. Thor was with them, happily rubbing his back against Jack's leg.

Tony was beginning to get a bit suspicious. This thing about a hockey competition seemed a bit crazy to him. "Is this a military base? Are you planning to invade Earth?" He began to imagine himself as the hero who will, with lots of derring-do, save the Earth from an alien attack. With his trusty sidekick Thor, he would, at the absolute last moment, discover the aliens' weak point, do something impossibly heroic and send them packing back to... wherever they came from. And where was that, he asked himself.

Jack burst out laughing. Thankfully his translator device was able to turn his strangled sounding alien laughter into Earth-like laughter. "Trust me, Mr Nothill," he said, "your Earth is quite safe from us. We hate war. We... Unglians," – that was the best the translator could make of the alien name for Jack's race – "are miners and, to use that overused phrase, we come in peace. Look out there." He pointed towards something outside the dome's transparent wall.

Tony followed his long pointing finger. It was at that moment he realized that Jack had six fingers on his hand. Wow! Three eyes and six-finger hands. Weird. He wondered how many toes he had. Then he thought he saw what Jack was pointing at.

The surface of Titan didn't look very friendly. Jack had explained that the moon's atmosphere outside the dome was poisonous to humans and Unglians. It was 95% nitrogen and 5% methane. No oxygen at all. It was also very, very, very cold. Tony was used to a cold winter day at home being maybe 0°C, at worst -1°C. He'd once seen a story about how cold it got at Earth's South Pole. It once got down to -80°C. Brrrrr!

But Jack had said it was usually around -180°C all day and all year on Titan. Tony couldn't even begin to imagine anything that cold. Why are they here then, he thought again. When he looked closer at the object outside on the icy Titan surface, he began to understand.

The ground was mostly a drab brown or ochre colour, much like the atmosphere, with flat plains and some small rolling hills. There were steep mountains in the far distance and scattered about the flatlands were small blue ponds. And about a kilometer away was a huge blue pond. Big enough to water ski on – if it was full of water. But it wasn't full of water, surely? It was too cold for liquid water. So Tony asked the question and Jack answered him.

"No, not water. The lake and ponds are full of liquid methane. Methane! Oodles and oodles of it.

"Methane?" Tony asked. "Ugh" he said, pretending to hold his nose. "Isn't that the smell you make when..?"

"When you let off a fluffy in the lift?" Jack suggested.

"Well, I was going to say a fart, but... yeah."

"Indeed it is. If you like, you could say each of those little ponds contains enough methane for a hundred million f... fluffies," Jack said, smirking.

Tony couldn't even begin to imagine how many billions of fluffies were in the huge blue lake.

And that is what the Unglians were mining and that is what Tony could now see. A massive mining tower in the middle of the lake, with a pumping house at the top and hoses going into and out of the lake, feeding the methane to a long row of huge spherical tanks.

Tony felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Use these," Jack said, handing him a pair of binoculars.

Tony looked at them. Hmmm, he thought. Not really binoculars, more like trinoculars. They had three tubes, each with an eyepiece designed to match the shape of an Unglian's eyes. He shrugged, put them up to his face and just used the two lower eyepieces. They fitted his eyes... just. He pointed them at one of the spherical tanks.

"Wow," he said aloud and he heard Jack chuckle. Obviously he had been expecting that reaction. Each of the tanks was mounted on a huge set of wheels which sat on railway tracks and the tracks entered a set of giant doors to an even gianter building that resembled an aircraft hanger.

"That's not an aircraft hanger, is it?" Tony asked.

Jack smiled. "For a hockey jock, you're very clever, Mr Nothill. No, it's not. It's where we keep our HP."

"Your HP?" Tony said.

"Yes, our Home Portal," Jack said. "It connects us directly with our home world – Unglia." Jack's face took on a wistful look, just for a moment, but it soon passed. "That's how we all came here. Through that portal. And all our machinery." He pointed out the huge spheres full of liquid methane. "And they are sent through the portal to deliver the precious methane to Unglia. It is all that is keeping our Unglian civilization going. Our life line."

A sudden thought struck Tony. "Wait on, Mr Chance," he said. "If that portal goes to Unglia, why didn't you send home for a replacement player? Why bother dragging me here?"

"I said you were clever," Jack replied. "I hope you are as fast on the hockey rink."

"Hockey field," Tony corrected him.

"I said, and I meant, rink," Jack corrected him back, clearly not offended.

"Um, what do you mean," Tony said. He was starting to get a bad feeling. Not as bad as having been unceremoniously yanked from his backyard across half the solar system to a super subzero freezing moon around the planet Saturn by a three-eyed alien to play in their hockey competition. But still bad.

Jack ignored his last question and answered his first. "To answer your question, we would if we could, but we couldn't so we improvised."

"That's as clear as Titan mud," Tony said.

"The Home Portal is fast, just like the smaller portal I used. But Unglia is a long way away..."

"How far away?" Tony interrupted.

"The other side of the Galaxy. The Milky Way." He saw the blank look on Tony's face. "Don't they teach you humans astronomy at school? It is precisely 68,589 light years away, in your constellation Centaurus."

"So..?"

"It takes around three of your Earth weeks for a return trip from Titan to Unglia," Jack said. "If we had sent home for a replacement player, the competition would have been over before he arrived. But Earth is only a few seconds of portal travel away. So we sussed out..."

"Sussed?" Tony laughed.

"That's the translation of our word for it. We sussed out the hockey competition on Earth, decided you were the best available player and, Bob's your uncle, as you say, here you are."

"Yes, here I am," Tony said, looking around the huge dome. Most of the aliens he saw were dressed in overalls with pale colours, mostly creams and yellows. But a few, like Jack, were dressed in a white suit, with the same set of colourful figures on it. "Jack, why are you still in your space suit, now you're back here?"

Jack laughed again. "No, this is not a space suit. This is my hockey suit. See?" He pointed to some of the figures on the arms and chest. "These are the logos for my team... your team now... the Titan Tigers." He quickly looked about him. "And since you reminded me, it is time for you to meet the other team members and get you suited up."

"Suited up?" Tony said.

"Well, you don't think you'll be playing in temperatures of minus one hundred and eighty degrees dressed like that, do you?" Jack said, pointing at Tony's hockey shirt and shorts. "Don't worry, your Titan hockey suit isn't that much different to what you're used to wearing back home. It's just that your helmet will be sealed."

“Sealed? Why?”

“Why? To keep the freezing air and poisonous gas out, of course.”

Tony gulped. He was having that bad feeling again. What did Jack mean by ‘not much different to what he was used to wearing’? He didn’t wear any special suit at home. Just shorts and shirt. Bad feeling. Bad bad feeling.

“Come on, let’s go meet your team.” Jack pointed Tony to a nearby shuttle buggy. “Come Thor,” he said and to Tony’s complete amazement, Thor did exactly what he was told. They both bounced over to the buggy and stepped in. Thor followed with tall bounding leaps. Naturally, he was overly boisterous and his last leap sent him clear over the top of the buggy.

Tony was already getting used to the strange walking action in the low gravity. In fact, it was fun. He could either take short floating steps or hop, two legged like a kangaroo. He decided he preferred to step, not hop.

As they drove across the dome, Tony peppered Jack with more questions about how they played hockey on Titan. “Why do we need the special suits? It’s safe here inside this dome,” Tony said.

“Ah, but the playing rink, or field as you quaintly call it, is not inside the dome,” Jack said.

“It’s not?”

“No. As the competition is between teams from other mining domes scattered around Titan, and as our people, though unwarlike, are very competitive and won’t play inside another team’s dome, we need a neutral rink... field.”

“And where’s that?” Tony asked.

Jack pointed over his left shoulder. “About fifty Earth kilometres that way. On Pond Number 351.”

Tony was shocked. “On a pond?” he said in a squeaky voice. “You can’t play hockey on liquid methane.”

“Der,” Jack’s clever translator said. “That’s why it’s frozen.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Tony insisted. “Stop the buggy.” He turned and stared at Jack Chance. “Please, tell me exactly, how you play hockey on frozen methane. And how do you freeze it? The pond is liquid, you told me yourself.”

Jack sighed. Earthlings. Not as smart as he had thought. “Mr Nothill,” he said, “liquid methane turns to solid ice if you can cool it to less than -182°C. That’s only three degrees colder than the pond’s liquid methane. So we put cooling pipes in the surface of the pond and cool it down a few degrees until the surface – the top 300mm – freezes. Then we play on that after we put the usual rail fences and nets around it to catch the pucks.” He paused to see if Tony was getting all this. So far, all he was getting was stunned silence and a blank look. He carried on. “Since it is outside the dome in the open Titan atmosphere, we need our special suits to keep out the freezing cold and poisonous gases.”

“Oooooaaaaaay,” Tony finally snapped out of it. “I think I get that. Weird, but I get it. But how do you run and stop on ice? Won’t you skid all over the place?”

Jack stared at Tony. Then he shook his head slowly. “Did I mention ice skates?”

“Ice skates?”

“Of course, just like you use back on Earth.” Suddenly Jack gave a big grin and slapped Tony on the back. “Ha ha, you had me going there for a moment. Good joke. Ha ha. And that’s why I said rink when you were teasing me saying field. Ha ha.” He restarted the buggy and headed towards one of the smaller buildings.

Bad feeling again. They play ice hockey, Tony realized, not normal hockey. I’ve never played ice hockey. Oh boy, bad feeling.

“And, ah, just how large is this rink of yours?” Tony asked.

“Huge,” Jack said proudly as he drove. “It has to be because of the low gravity. The puck goes faster and further. Makes it all very exciting.”

“Yes, exciting, I’m sure,” Tony nodded.

“And dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“Yes, well, players can go super fast, so does the puck. Keeps the first aid people very busy.” Jack seemed to find that amusing.

“Ah, would that have anything to do with how your star player was injured?” Tony guessed.

“Yes, an unfortunate side rail two-player crash – more of a crunch - at thirty kilometres per hour,” Jack said.

“Ouch, that would hurt,” Tony winced.

Jack laughed. “You should have seen the other guy. His whole...”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Tony said, blocking his ears. When he was sure Jack had stopped describing the injuries, he changed the topic. “How huge is huge?”

“Oh, a bit over three times the normal rink size. It’s two hundred metres long and eighty metres wide,” Jack said.

Tony didn’t play ice hockey but he followed it. He knew that there were only six players per side on the field, including the goalie. On this huge field, players would be very thin on the ground. Or the ice. He said as much to Jack, at least about the number of players.

“Yes, that would be a problem,” he agreed. “That’s why in Titan Hockey, there are eight players plus a goalie per team.”

“That’s nine,” Tony said.

“Good maths,” Jack said. “We play three forward, three in the centre and two defenders. Works for us.”

By then they had reached their destination. Thor jumped down, followed by Jack and Tony. Jack led them into the small building, down a short corridor and into a large room that looked like a gym. There were lots of exercise machines, benches and smelly towels on the floor. And there were more aliens in one place than Tony had seen so far.

There were twenty six of them, all looking a lot like Jack Chance except, when Tony looked closer, there were differences. Just like people, Tony supposed. And they were all looking at Tony. Very closely.

“Mr Nothill,” Jack said in a very formal voice, “meet the Titan Tigers Team.”

Tony took a deep breath, tried to smile and gave a small wave. “Hi,” he said.

“And team, this is our replacement player. Meet Number 11 from the Pittsburg Penguins... Trent Nothill.”

All the Tigers gave a burst of polite applause, though Tony sensed some were less enthused than others. He saw a few six-fingered hands covering mouths as they spoke to a neighbor while watching him.

“Er, Mr Chance, can I talk to...”

“What is it, Trent?” Jack said, beaming at him. “You want to give the team a bit of your pep talk magic? Hey team, listen up, Trent here...”

“No, no, I’m not... I mean... I don’t think you...” Tony stumbled. “Mr Chance, I... I... don’t know how to tell you, but... I...”

“What the poor boy is trying to tell you, Jack, is that he isn’t Trent Nothill. Nor is he from the Pittsburg Penguins.” One of the team had stood forward. He had No. 23 on his suit. “Are you, son?” It was then that Tony noticed all the Tigers had been supplied with a translator like Jack’s.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jack said. “Look at his shirt. It says so on the back.”

“What does the ‘T’ stand for, son?” No. 23 said with a kind voice. At least the translator made it sound kind.

“Tony, sir,” Tony replied. “And I play for the Narellan Nighthawks Under 13s hockey team.

“Not ice hockey?” No. 23 said.

“No sir, just plain old hockey.”

“Are you any good at it?” No. 23 asked.

Tony puffed himself up a bit. “I think so. I got the ‘Best Player’ award this year.”

“Well done you,” No. 23 said, and Tony sensed he meant it. Then No. 23 turned to Jack with a less friendly look. “But not so well done you, Jack,” he said.

Jack looked very uncomfortable. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he whispered to Tony.

“You never told me you wanted Trent Nothill. Just T. Nothill, No. 11. And that was me... I thought,” Tony whispered back, maybe a little too loudly as the Tigers seemed to be listening with interest. “You should have said you wanted Trent. I would have told you that wasn’t me. I’m an eleven year old boy, not a man. Surely, you can tell the difference? Besides, how would I know what you wanted? You’re an alien. For all I know, a garden snail might have suited you.”

Before Jack could reply, No.23 cut in. “Jack, you have to send the boy home. Now. Then go collect this Trent and we can still practice before the semi-final tomorrow.” He took a step forward and pointed a long index finger at Jack. “That is, assuming you can locate him this time.”

“Of course I can,” Jack huffed. “Come on Mr Nothill... er, Tony... let’s get to the portal. Come Thor,” and he started towards the gym door.

“Er, bye Tigers, sorry about the mix-up,” Tony said. “Good luck with your games.”

This time it was No. 16 who spoke. “Thanks, and it’s not your fault, Tony. Maybe in eight years you can come back. But learn to play ice hockey first,” and he laughed, joined by the others.

Just as Tony entered the corridor, he heard one of the other players say: “Pity he has to take the dog. That mutt’s a lot of fun.”

It was a quiet trip in the buggy back to the portal. Jack wasn’t happy. Tony tried to apologise but Jack wouldn’t have any of it. He realized that it was all his own fault. In the backyard, he hadn’t asked Tony who he was, he just assumed he had found Trent, then snatched him. Obviously his locator device had malfunctioned. He should have... what’s the point? He blew it. Now he had to do it all over again, only this time get it right.

When they arrived at the portal site, even Tony could see something was wrong. There was a large gang of overall wearing aliens gathered around the portal ring, aiming various instruments at it and poking it with odd shaped tools. But it didn’t look right. The pink spiral arms were very droopy and were barely spinning at all. And the watery wobble-board sounding face of the portal hole was now a sick greenish slate.

“What’s happening?” Jack asked the nearest technician.

“The portal’s down,” the technician answered. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“But... I need it,” Jack protested. “I need it now.”

“And I need a pay rise,” the tech said, “but that’s not going to happen either.”

Jack found the supervising technician but was told the same thing. The portal will be unavailable for at least three days.

“Three days,” wailed Jack. “But the first game starts tomorrow.”

“I have an idea,” said the supervisor.

“Yes, what?” Jack said, hopeful again.

“Tell it to someone who cares,” the super said, and laughed. Obviously not a hockey fan.

Jack slumped back into the buggy. “The portal...”

“Yes, I heard,” Tony said. “I’m sorry Jack.”

“This is a disaster. We need every player we can get. What am I going to tell the team.”

They were silent for a while as Jack wallowed in his misery, then Tony spoke up.

“I have an idea,” he said.

Jack turned to him. “Don’t you dare say…”

“No, I really do have an idea.” Tony took a deep breath. “I can still play for you. I’ll be your Trent.”

“What?” Jack said, all three eyes popping wide open in surprise.

“I mean… I know I can’t be as good as Trent… I’ve seen him play on TV, he’s awesome,” Tony said. “But I can skate…”

“Thank the gods for that,”

“…sort of…”

“Sort of?” Jack gasped.

“Well we’ve been to the local rink and I can stay on my feet…”

“Oh, good,” Jack nodded.

“… most of the time,” Tony said.

“Ye gods, we’re doomed,” Jack slapped his forehead.

“But I’m sure I’ll get the hang of it. And the good news is I know the rules, I can use a hockey stick, and …”

“And?” Jack prompted him.

“… how hard can it be?” Tony concluded with a smile.

Jack closed his eyes and buried his head slowly in his hands. What was he to do? He couldn’t possibly let this boy, Tony, play with the big Unglians. He’d get hurt. Wouldn’t he?

“Jack,” Tony said. “Two more reasons you should let me play.”

“Mmmm,” Jack mumbled without uncovering his head.

“Your team are miners, not pro sportsmen. How do they compare in skill with the Earth’s top ice hockey league?”

Jack raised his head and thought about it. “I’d say the same as a local all age hockey team compared to the Kookaburras,” he said.

“So, not that great,” Tony said.

“And the second reason I should let you play was?”

Tony at up, folded his arms and said: “I’m here. I’m all you’ve got. I’m no Trent Nothill, but I’ll do my best not to disgrace the Narellan Nighthawks.” He patted Jack on his shoulder. “What have you got to lose?”

Jack started the buggy and turned it back towards the team hut. Thor gave a happy bark and gave Jack’s ear a sloppy lick. After playfully brushing Thor off, Jack laughed. “Yes, what have we got to lose? What indeed.”

*

The Titan Tigers adopted Thor as their mascot, even though he wasn’t a tiger. An Unglian craftsman quickly adapted one of their uniform suits, with some clever stitching, into a shape that Thor could fit into. The helmet was not a great challenge as the Unglians, resembling the movie E.T. in facial shape, had the same protruding mouth and nose that Thor did so a standard Unglian helmet fitted him nicely.

They found one of their smallest suits for Tony to use. Then they managed to find a pair of skates that suited his smaller feet. Again, the craftsman won the day with some clever padding between two thick pairs of socks to fill the skates snugly.

A special bib was made for Tony’s back. It said “Nothill, 11” in proud English.

Finally he was handed his stick. Tony looked at it carefully. It was completely different to his stick at home. Instead of having a short curled end for whacking the ball. It had a long straight end, designed to slide along the ice surface and make contact with the low flat puck. Now this will be interesting, he thought.

Tony was as ready as he ever would be.

And he was already beginning to regret his offer. What on Earth have I got myself into, he thought for the umpteenth time. Then the thought flashed into his mind: I wish Sam and Ricky were here to see this.

The Tigers all gathered in the gym room to hear their coach’s talk. The coach, named Pete Patch by the translator, stood in the centre of the circle of twenty seven players, which included three goalies. Even they can be injured. Tony wasn’t surprised to see Jack in his uniform with the team but he was surprised to see the captain’s armband on his sleeve. Captain? Wow.

After a brief speech welcoming Tony to the team and a promise to try to protect him as best they could, the coach got on with his team briefing. He put Tony in the third of the three squads as left defence to replace the injured player.

There was then a lot of tactical talk, with drawings on a white board which Tony did his best to follow but was lost very quickly. At one stage, the No. 23 player, named Brock Layer by the translator, sidled up to him and whispered in his ear. “Don’t worry too much about those fancy moves. They hardly ever work. My advice?” he looked around to see if anyone could overhear him. “Try to stay on your feet, keep your stick down at all times and, when you have the puck, whack it like hell towards the opponent’s goal. Works for me.” He patted Tony on the back and drifted away.

I'll try to remember that, Tony thought. Especially the first bit.

*

The next day, after a not so good sleep in the low gravity, their semi-final game, against the Titan Bears, arrived. Tony had discovered that the Tigers had already won three games before reaching the semi-finals. If they won this game, they would be in the Finals. The first time they had ever gotten that far.

Tony was surprised how good the food for breakfast was. These Unglians must have similar taste buds to humans, he realized, so at least he knew he wasn't going to starve on Titan. He might be killed in some horrible skating accident, but at least he'd have a fully tummy.

Tony and Thor, fully dressed in their hockey suits, mustered with the team in the dome's transportation bay. It was here that Tony got his next surprise, of many.

"How are we going to get to the playing field... er, I mean rink, Mr Layer?" Tony asked No. 23 who seemed to have taken Tony's welfare under his wing. "Fifty kilometres is a long way."

"How else? We fly," No. 23 said. "And call me Brock."

"Fly? On Titan? How?" Tony would never had thought of it.

"Well, why waste a good, though unbreathable, atmosphere?" Brock said. "The atmosphere out there is so thick, and with the low gravity, if you had enough energy you could attach wings to your arms and fly by flapping them like one of your birds."

"What, I've got to flap my arms for fifty kilometres?" Tony went pale for a moment.

Brock burst out laughing. "No, we only do that over short distances for fun. We'll do it the easy way today."

"What's that," Tony said.

"We take a plane."

"Oh." Tony felt a bit foolish, but then he saw the funny side of it and was soon laughing with his new friend Brock.

Fifteen minutes later, after taking a shuttle bus out through the dome air-lock and driving to an airfield, the team was queuing up to board a small airplane. It was the first time since he had arrived on Titan that Tony was outside the dome. Standing on the raw, unprotected surface of the second largest moon in the solar system. That bit of astronomy he remembered from a talk his Pa had given with his telescope one night. He also remembered asking his Pa if man would ever walk on Titan and Pa had laughed and said "no, it's far too cold on Titan. You wouldn't survive it." Well, has he got something to tell his Pa when - if - he gets home.

Then Tony looked up... and his jaw dropped.

There, just visible through the ochre atmosphere, was the huge orb of Saturn, straddled by its beautiful rings.



It was so majestic, looming above the moon's surface. It was so large he felt he could reach out and touch it. And there, to the left of Saturn near the horizon was this small blazing yellow light. What was that?

Tony finally managed to shut his mouth and asked Brock.

“Why, that’s your Sun, of course,” Brock said.

“No, it can’t be. The Sun’s a lot bigger than that,” Tony objected.

“Not when it’s one and a half billion kilometres away, it isn’t,” laughed Brock. Brock seemed to laugh a lot, Tony decided.

Tony’s jaw dropped again. What Brock said suddenly reminded him just how far away from home he was. He was brought back down to Titan by a gentle prod in his back by Jack Chance.

“If you’ve finished skygazing, maybe we can all get on board the plane,” Jack said.

“Oh, sure, sorry,” Tony said and started bouncing towards the boarding ramp. As he did, he had a good look at the aircraft he was about to fly in.

It had a stubby fuselage which, Toby estimated, was about as long as a big coach on Earth. In fact it looked a lot like the fifty seat tourist coach Tony and his family had travelled in on their West Australian holiday. Only that coach didn’t have wings. This one did. And very big wings. Each wing was at least as long as a cricket pitch... and the rest. And each wing had a propeller engine on it, but at the back of the wing, not the front. That’s weird, Tony thought.

At the rear of the fuselage was a stubby tail with small tail wings on either side. Just like a normal plane, Tony thought, only different.

“What drives the propellers?” Tony asked Brock as they shuffled on board.

“Methane, of course,” he smiled. “What else.”

“Yes, what else,” Tony said. “Der!”

Soon they were all strapped into their seats, with Thor sitting beside Tony in the aisle. Thor was happy inside his custom-made suit and Tony could see his eyes inside the helmet taking in everything going on around him.

The take off was very quick, the plane needing very little runway to get off the frozen ground as the thick atmosphere gave the stubby plane more lift than an Earth airplane could ever hope for. As they flew low over the Titan landscape, Tony took in as much as he could.

He saw low fields and plains of different shades of brown, peppered by little bluish ponds of liquid methane. Some of these were connected by small rivulets of liquid, many of which started up in the low hills. He couldn’t believe it. It was just as if someone had taken a photo on the Australian rural countryside and changed all the greens to brown. How was he going to describe all this when he got home? How he wished right then that he had a camera. No-one was going to believe his story.

He was startled by a sudden flash of light. What had happened? Was there an explosion on the plane? Were they about to crash?

Then he saw Brock who was further down the aisle waving something at him. Tony laughed. It was a camera. Brock was tasking candid team shots. Who knows, maybe..?

“Prepare to land, Tigers,” the pilot’s voice said over the intercom.

Tony looked out the window again. There, just ahead and to the right, was something on a large flat area. It was a huge circular shape but it wasn’t a dome. It was open to the Titan elements. It looked like... a huge arena, with bleacher type seats all around it and a large oval of blue ice inside. Wow, Tony thought. That’s where we’ll be playing. Oh boy.

The plane landed as gently as it had taken off and the Titan Tigers plus mascot were shuttled by another coach into the players’ dressing room, via an air lock. This room was sealed from the outside conditions, so the players could take their helmets off, have a drink and relax. But once they left this room, it would be total Titan conditions.

Freezing cold, poisonous atmosphere.

The players were all getting excited now, not just Tony.

“Er, Jack,” Tony asked, “how long before the game starts?”

“Why, you keen to get at it, eh?” Jack replied. “Patience. Another two hours.”

“Good, because I was hoping I might be able to get a little practice in?”

“Passing and shooting?” Jack said.

“No, mostly staying on my feet,” Tony said.

“Hmmm, maybe a good idea. Brock?” Jack called over No. 23. “Can you spare some time to help our new recruit find his feet?”

“Ha, no problemo,” Brock said. He’d clearly been watching too much Earth TV, Tony thought.

Tony and Brock put their helmets back on, checked the seals, then found their way out onto the ice rink. Tony had to work hard not to bounce off the ice as he skated as the gravity didn’t do much to keep him down. “Is there a trick to this?” Tony asked.

“Yes, try to push down as you skate,” Brock said. “Simple.”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony said but tried anyway. After a while, it seemed to work.

Tony finally took his mind off the ice and his skates and looked about him, “Awesome, man,” he said. And it was.

They were standing at one end of the rink near the curved fence. The fence was a solid but flexible super-plastic about as high as Tony’s shoulders. It had a padded rim along its top. Tony gave the face of the fence a bash with his stick. The stick bounced back, so the fence had some give in it. Just as well, Tony thought, otherwise it would be like hitting a brick wall.

He looked down field. It was a long way to the far end. Two hundred metres. Two football fields. Four Olympic swimming pools. However you put it, a plurry long way.

And eighty metres across. Wow. That's a lot of skating. Thank goodness he won't have to cover all that distance, just try and defend the bit at his goal's end. Yeah! Just!

"Come on sport," Brock called, "time is a ticking. Better start your practice."

"Yeah, sure," Tony said. And he did. Slowly at first, with lots of falling. When he fell, he had a close look, through his helmet's visor, at the blue ice. It looked just like normal ice, only blue. Wow, he thought. So that's frozen fart. Good thing I can't smell it through the helmet.

He practiced and practiced, with Brock's encouragement and, after an hour he was starting to feel confident he could skate for long periods without falling over. It was the twists and turns at high speed that gave him the most trouble, so Brock spent another thirty minutes drilling him on that.

By the time the practice was over, Tony was feeling very hot and sweaty inside his suit, but he also started to feel a hope that he might just survive this. As they skated back to their team room, Tony suddenly realized something that punctured his confidence again.

He still hadn't hit a puck with his stick.

And the game was due to start in fifteen minutes.

Bad feeling. Bad bad feeling.

*

The bleachers were full of off-shift workers. The Unglian company that ran the mines recognized the need to give its workers a chance to relax and it seemed that sport was not only an international obsession but an interplanetary one.

As Tony sat hugging his hockey stick in the Tigers' bunker next to the rink's fence, with the other seventeen reserves, he could hear the spectators chanting for their teams. The cries of "Tigers, Tigers, Rip 'em, tear em" were matched by "Bears claw, Bears roar." It was not the polite and sporting atmosphere he was used to from the sidelines at the Narellan Hockey Centre. But he didn't blame the Unglians for that. He knew that was the ice hockey culture in North America and Europe too. He didn't like it but it certainly stirred the blood. Now why did he mention blood?

The Tigers first squad of nine players had taken to the rink. Tony could see Jack Chance, with his captain's arm sash, shaking hands with the Bears captain in the centre of the rink. The Bears uniform was a dark brown, with lots of red motifs. Even with eighteen players and three referees on the rink, spread out in their attacking and defending positions, there still looked like a lot of empty ice out there.

A siren sounded and the game was on. The crowd roared even louder as the Bears captain stole the puck from Jack and powered his way down rink towards the Titan's goal. He feinted a pass to his left wing and as the Tigers defender swerved to intercept the puck, the Bear kept the puck and powered straight on.

Another Tiger swished across the ice to block the Bear's advance and it was then that something astonishing happened. At least it was astonishing to Tony.

The Bears player kept right at the Tiger defender who braced himself for a sudden left or right swerve. But instead, the Bear, at the very last moment, scooped the puck up with his stick, leapt from the ice's surface and soared high, high above the defender. The defender just stood there, looking up at the Bear's skates as the Bear passed over his head and gradually came down well past him, skating on towards the goal with the puck before him. Brilliant stuff!

That was Titan's low gravity at work.

The Bear supporters roared. Tony swallowed hard.

Bad feeling, he thought. Bad bad feeling.

It was then that Tony realized why Jack Chance was the Tiger's captain. With a blinding burst of speed that Tony would not have thought possible, Jack came up from behind the Bear captain, swerved around him with a spray of blue ice and plucked the puck from the face of the Bear's stick. Then he was off, leaving the Bear growling at his empty stick.

Jack sent the puck sizzling up the left side, found his wing who sent it on to the centre forward. The centre forward was challenged by the Bear's defender. The forward passed it to the inside forward who skated around the back of the goal, using the wall to direct the puck. He cut around the goal post, was foiled by the goalie but passed it to Jack who had approached down the middle. Jack flicked it back to his team-mate on the right who, again, was blocked by the goalie. He passed it back to Jack who feinted a pass to the man on his left. When the goalie went to block, Jack, who had held on to the puck, drove it like a bullet into the back of the net.

There was a roar from the Tiger's fans.

1 - 0 to the Tigers.

Tony was in awe. It was all so fast out there. The puck was sizzling across the ice surface like a rifle bullet. Nothing he had ever done or seen on a sand or water hockey field came close to what he had just seen.

Nervous as he was, he couldn't wait till he had his go at it.

That moment came sooner than he thought.

The puck was in play again. Jack had won it and drove down the middle of the rink. Unfortunately, his pass to his winger was cleverly intercepted and the puck sent down the left side. The Bears right wing controlled it and hugged the rail, intending to take it around the back of the goal. The Tigers right back, No. 18, had other plans and charged in at the Bear, planning to squash him against the railing and steal the puck. The Bear saw him coming and screeched to a sudden halt, sending a huge spray of blue ice over the railing. No. 18 careened through the icy spray and collided, hard, with the fence rail.

The 'oooohhh' from the crowd said it all.

After the trainers had carried the unconscious Tiger from the rink, Coach Patch called out, "Nothill, you're on." Then, a little more kindly, as Tony shuffled past him, "good luck son."

"Thanks coach, I'll do my best," Tony said, then he skated out onto the rink to the sound of cheers from the Tigers supporters. Unfortunately, the information hadn't gotten out to them that the Nothill, No. 11 taking the rink wasn't Trent Nothill. Their expectations were high. A lot higher than Tony's.

As it turned out, the Bears didn't know that Tony wasn't Trent either, so they paid him a lot of respect by trying to keep the puck away from him. It wasn't until the last minutes of the first of the three twenty minute periods that the puck came within Tony's reach.

Tony's centre back team-mate was hemmed in by Bear attackers near the goal circle. In desperation, he saw Tony free near the rail and flicked the puck towards him.

Here's my chance, Tony thought and skated to intercept the puck. He sensed a Bears player bearing down on him. What to do? Then he remembered Brock's advice. He was still on his feet. He kept his stick down flush with the ice and skidded to a halt as the puck reached it. He trapped the puck. Like a golfing pro at the first tee, he wound up, swung and struck the puck hard, sending it down the centre of the rink towards the Bear's goal.

Then the charging Bear collided with him.

'Ooohhh' went the crowd.

Up and up went Tony, following a graceful arc above the ice. Twenty metres down rink, he landed softly on the ice and slid another thirty metres before he hit the back rail with a not so gentle thud.

Tony looked up, thinking it strange that he could see stars through the thick Titan atmosphere, then realized they weren't real stars but... stars in his head.

Unglians in the front bleacher were staring down at him, curious about this famous Trent Nothill from Earth. How tough was he, really?

Tony went to move and, to his amazement, found that he could. He felt his head, or more accurately, his helmet. Yes, it was still on. He could wiggle his toes. Well, he thought, I don't know how tough Trent Nothill is, but I know how tough I am, and he slowly regained his feet, waved his stick at the cheering crowd and skated back onto the rink.

Then the siren blew for the end of the first period.

Relieved and still feeling a bit sore, Tony slowly skated fifty metres to the bunker gate, got a 'well done' slap on his back from Coach Patch and collapsed onto the bench. But he wasn't there for long. Coach patch shoed the whole squad back through the air lock into the team dressing room, where they removed their helmets, wiped the sweat from their heads and downed lots of energy drinks.

"How do you feel, Tony?" Brock asked him. "A bit sore?"

"A bit," Tony agreed.

"Yeah, but that was a great hit ... yours with the stick, I mean, not the Bear sending you flying. The puck went all the way into their goal third before the Bears got to it." Brock winked his third eye. "That bought us some time. Well done."

"Gee, thanks," Tony said. Wow, he thought. I actually did something good. All of a sudden, he didn't feel that sore.

"Listen up Tigers." It was coach Patch. "We're one goal up." That brought a cheer from the players. "Cut the cheering, you lot. One goal's not enough. You gotta score again." He quickly looked at his chart. "This period, I'm sending the second squad on, but the rest of you, be prepared to be sent on. I'm expecting the Bears to come back hard at us, and it could be rough out there." He looked around the room. "Where's our mascot, Thor?"

"Here Coach," No. 15, who had been scrubbing Thor's tummy, called out.

"Front and centre, Thor," Coach Patch said and, again to Tony's amazement, Thor came straight away.

"Have you got anything to say to your team, Thor?" Thor just looked at him, head cocked to one side.

Then Coach switched off his translator and repeated himself in Unglian. "????????????????????????????????????????????"

Thor wagged his tail furiously and let out a series of yelps and barks as he ran around the room, making eye contact with each player.

The coach turned his translator back on so Tony could understand Unglian again.

"You heard it from our mascot, Tigers. Get out there and do our dome proud."

Players took one last sip of drink, put their helmets back on and filed into the air lock on the way to their rink-side bunker.

In the bunker, Tony found himself sitting between Jack Chance and Brock. They watched as the second period started and the puck was sent hurtling from stick to stick at what Tony thought were unbelievable speeds. With the extra low gravity, the puck didn't spend a lot of time on the ice but speeding just above the ice in long low arcs.

On the Earth's moon's vacuum it would have been a nightmare, but thankfully Titan's heavy atmosphere had some affect in slowing the puck down. Not a lot, but some.

Another 'ooooohhh' went up from the crowd, but this time it was a Bears player who had come off second best from an energetic challenge at the rails. Play was suspended as the medics stretchered the unhappy player off the rink, to be replaced by another.

The game resumed.

Tony was thrilled. He knew that he would never want the non-contact aspect of his hockey to change, but he had to admit this ice hockey was exciting to watch, especially as he was actually in the thick of it.

The sudden shifts in the direction of play, the clever use of the side rail to deflect the puck, even to guide it around the back of the goals. And the speed of everything. The players on their skates. The puck shooting across the ice...

Suddenly it was 1 - 1. Out of what seemed a no-chance play, a Bear had fluked a deflection off a Tigers defender and wrong footed the goalie.

A huge groan went up from the Tigers supporters, matched by a huge cheer from the Bears fans.

"Not good," mumbled Jack.

Coach Patch clearly agreed and held up the No. 17 sign to tell that player to come in. "Jack, you're on," he said. "We need some magic out there, man."

Jack shuffled to the rail gate, waiting for No. 17 to arrive. "Some magic coming up, Coach," he said, but just as he stepped onto the ice, the siren for the end of the period sounded. "How's that for magic?" he asked, smiling.

"Not what I wanted," Coach grumped.

Back in the dressing room, Coach Patch gave the team his best gee-up speech, punctuated by encouraging barks from Thor. This was their last chance to make the Finals, he said. Don't blow it.

Since the third squad was taking to the rink in this final period, Tony braced himself for some on-ice action. How will he go this time? But when they all settled into the bunker and Tony joined his fellow squad members to shuffle out the gate onto the rink, Coach Patch took him aside.

"Tony, I think you should sit this one out," Coach said.

For a second, Tony wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed. Then he decided. "Aw, Coach, I was really hoping I could..." Then Tony stopped talking. He knew he shouldn't argue with his coach.

Coach Patch gave him a good hard look. "After what you copped out there earlier, do you really want to risk it again? I have to look out for you, you're only a kid, remember?"

Tony looked down at his skates. "Yes, Coach. Thanks, Coach," he mumbled.

"What was that?" Coach said. "I didn't quite hear you."

Brock moved up beside them. "I think what he was saying, Coach, is that yes, thanks for caring but, yes, he is willing to risk it because... why because exactly, Tony?"

Tony looked up at the coach. "Because I'm proud to be a member of the Tigers, Coach. And Tigers roar."

Coach Patch shook his head in amazement, then slapped Tony on the shoulder. "In that case, we're proud to have you, so on you go, No. 11, and do your darndest."

Tony, relieved at getting another chance, but also more than a little bit terrified, skated out to take up his position as left defender.

The siren blew and the game was on. The Tigers won the puck centre challenge and his centre forward skated up rink, flanked by his wings.

Tony held his position, waiting for his chance. It soon came when a Bears defender stole the puck from a Tiger attacker and sent it spinning down the side rail like a cannon shot. Straight towards Tony.

Tony skated across to meet it but suddenly a Bear's stick end found its way inside his right skate's blade and he crashed face down onto the blue ice.

The Ref's whistle blew and the offending Bear was sent to the sin bin as Tony picked himself up. The Ref placed the puck at his feet and blew 'play on.'

Tony saw his left wing free far down the huge rink so he gave it his best golf shot and the puck went hurtling in that direction, to the cheers of the Tiger fans. So hard did Tony swing that after connecting with the puck, he lost his balance and fell ungracefully onto his bum, to the added cheers of the Bears fans. Tony picked himself up, a bit red faced inside his helmet, and took his place again.

Tony was getting excited now as he realized his skating skills were improving as the game progressed, so the next time a Bear approached with the puck, he didn't wait for him to arrive but took it to him. Sometimes he was beaten by fancy side swerves, but sometimes he tricked the attacker and stole the puck.

This is fun, he thought.

As the end of the third and final period approached, the score was 2 - 2. Tony found himself with the puck at his stick, inside his goal's third, and two Bear attackers coming at him, one from each side. Remembering Brock's advice, he prepared to whack the puck down rink. He pulled his stick back, way over his right shoulder, then swung hard.

The two Bears players flinched and jumped to avoid being hit by the puck, carrying themselves in the air way past where Tony had stood.

And it was where Tony had stood, not where he was now standing, as Tony had actually faked the connection with the puck with a deliberate air swing and as his attackers had sailed past him, he collected the puck and steered it at his highest speed down the rink towards his waiting centre field players.

With the puck still at his stick, he met them but continued on, passing the puck back and forth to the left wing, then the centre until they had got past the Bears centre fielders. Finally, Tony flicked the puck to the Tigers centre forward and stopped to watch and learn.

During play, Jack had come on to replace the centre forward and, again, Tony got to see why Jack was Captain of the Tigers.

In a dazzling display of skating and stick work, plus the use of the rail behind the goal, Jack avoided the Bears defenders three times before, suddenly, he popped out from behind the goal and before the goalie could shift sides, he drove the puck into the back of the net.

Goal! The score was now Tigers 3, Bears 2.

Then the siren blew for full time. The Tigers had won.

They were going to the Finals.

The cheers of the fans were deafening but as Tony shuffled along the hand-shake line, he was still able to hear some of his opponents' comments.

"Good game Nothill," said one Bear.

"Thanks," Tony said. "You too."

"How's this compare with Earth?" another asked.

"Colder," Tony replied.

"You had me fooled for a while," another Bear said.

"Huh?"

“All that falling over stuff,” the Bear gruffed. “To make us think you weren’t that Trent Nothill ring-in. Boy, was I fooled.”

“Oh, sorry,” Tony said. Not, he thought.

Back in the Tigers dressing room, helmets off and energy drinks being guzzled, the Tigers were ecstatic. The coach was a little more restrained but Tony could tell that he was ecstatic inside. Coach Patch was busily rubbing Thor’s upturned tummy as if there was no tomorrow and Thor was enjoying every moment of it.

“Well done, all of you,” Coach Patch said. “Jack, that last goal was a corker. You been practicing secretly?”

Jack put his finger to his lips. “Shhh, not so loud. The boss thinks I’ve been working on the mine.”

The Tigers all laughed. The Coach Patch turned to Tony.

“And well done you, Tony. Your Nighthawks would be proud of you.”

Tony blushed as he got a rousing cheer from the team and a loud bark from Thor.

“Now rest up everyone,” Coach continued. “Tomorrow we play for the trophy. The Demons are not going to lie down for us. It will be hard but...” he looked around the room, eyeballing each player... “we can do it. Well, can we?”

There was a shout of “Yes” from the team.

“They didn’t hear you outside. I said, can we do it?”

“YES” the roar from twenty seven Tigers could be heard in the bleachers outside the dressing room.

*

On the short flight back to the dome, tired as he was, Tony was too excited to sleep. He replayed the game he had just been in over and over in his head. He still couldn’t believe it. Was he really here on the moon Titan, orbiting the giant planet Saturn, over a billion and a half kilometres from home? Was he really playing ice hockey in absolutely freezing temperatures in poisonous gas on a lake of frozen farts with a team of three eyed aliens?

Or was he dreaming?

He looked out the window of the plane as it approached the dome. The rugged brown terrain of Titan was weird and scary but also, in a strange way, beautiful. The hemispherical dome, seen from above was majestic and welcoming, an oasis of life in the midst of the life threatening Titan environment. Tony realized he could never possibly have imagined such a thing, so it couldn’t be a dream.

He really was here.

After a hearty dinner – boy, these Unglians know how to cook – Tony and Thor went to bed, Tony in his comfortable guest’s bed and Thor beside him, curled up on the bed cover in the crook of Tony’s legs.

Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

*

At the end of the second period, the score was 2 – 2. The Tigers had played hard. The Demons had played even harder. And rougher.

Because it was such an important game, and because of Tony’s lack of experience and, he had to admit, his tender age, the coach had changed his players’ schedule and put Tony on in the first period, not the third.

Tony understood why. Coach need his best players in the last period. No argument from him.

During the first period, in his old position as left defender, Tony had played his heart out. He had been bowled over by a Demon three times, twice crashing into the side rail and once, he was sent flying so high he landed in the second row of the spectators.

Thankfully no-one was hurt by his skis and the soft landing in the laps of the spectators saved him from any broken bones or a torn suit.

Still, he gave as good as he got and he received a huge cheer from the Tigers fans when he managed to trick two Demon attackers into charging him from opposite sides, then jump up high at the last moment and let them collide beneath him. Both had to be stretchered off.

He didn’t remember how he did it but once during a Demon’s rush on his goal, Tony had managed to extend his stick at an angle and deflect the puck, which was flying like a bullet, upwards and over the goal and into the packed stand, saving a sure goal.

Still, the Demons managed to score one goal, while Jack Chance – Captain Courageous Tony thought of him – scored one at the other end.

So, at the end of the first period, with a 1 – 1 score line, a sore and tired Tony returned to the dressing room with his team, feeling he had done his share. His game was over. The Nighthawks would be proud.

If they ever heard of this.

Now they were in the dressing room again, preparing for the third and final period. The twenty minutes that would decide who won the coveted trophy - The Unglian Mining Corporation Interdome Hockey Trophy.

Coach Patch made one small change to his players line-up. Due to injuries in each period, there had been a number of substitutions and some third squad players who had subbed had also been injured. The game had been that rough.

“Jack,” Coach said. “I’m putting you back on this period. You up to it?”

“Do Unglians have three eyes?” Jack said in the traditional ‘der’ response.

“Okay, that’s it then. Good luck boys.” He nodded to Thor who had been waiting for his cue. Thor padded around inside the circle of players, giving each an encouraging bark and tail wag, then stood beside the coach.

“Now you’ve been blessed. Let’s get out there and give them hell.” The coach led the way to the air lock and his team followed him. It was time.

There were five minutes left to play. Both teams had scored once in what was a grueling match, bringing the score line to 3 – 3.. While the Tigers were trying to play clever, the Demons were living up to the name and just playing rough.

Coach Patch had already had to substitute three players who had been hurt by illegal charges against the rails. Who would be next?

As it turned out, it was Captain Courageous.

Jack Chance was performing one of his brilliant runs around the back of the Demon's goal, the puck safely held by the face of his stick, as if glued there. Hidden by the net of the goal, a defender had launched past the goal post and aimed himself like a missile at Jack, with no attempt to steal the puck.

The 'oooohhhh' from the crowd could have been heard at the Tigers' dome fifty kilometres away. The Ref had no hesitation in showing a red card and sending the Demon player from the rink but the damage was done. Jack was out for the count.

The Tigers fans fell silent as the stretcher bore Jack from the rink towards the medical centre. Coach Patch raced across the rink to see how badly his captain was hurt. He came back slowly, shaking his head.

"Not good," he said as he reached the team bunker. "Not good."

Brock spoke up for the others. "Is he..?"

"No, not dead," the coach said. "Just... not good."

At that moment, one of the referees skated up to the bunker. "Coach, we have to get the game going again. Are you putting someone on or not?"

"Of course I am, Charlie, just hold your horses,' Coach said to the referee, who skated off again.

Coach Patch looked around the Tigers faces, all watching him, wondering who he would send on, the game in the balance, only four minutes left to play.

Coach Patch made his decision. "Nothill, you're on. Grab your stick."

"What?" Tony heard someone say. Then he realized it had been him.

"You heard me. On you go. Show them how it's done the Nighthawk way," the coach said. He stepped up and whispered something in Tony's ear, and winked.

As Tony stepped through the gate onto the ice, there was a roar from the Tigers fans. Nothill, No. 11 from Earth was taking over from their captain. Watch out you Demons.

Brock sat down next to Coach Patch. "I hope you know what you're doing Coach," he said.

Coach watched as Tony skated up-rink to take Jack's position as centre forward. A position he had never played in normal hockey, let alone ice hockey. "It's an old coach's trick, Brock. Throw something unknown and unpredictable into the mix and see what pops out." He gave a low chuckle. "And I can't think of anything more unknown and unpredictable in our squad than young Tony out there. Can you?" He tapped Thor on his helmet. Thor had his front paws resting on the railing watching Tony on the rink. "What do you think, Thor?"

Thor let out three loud barks that turned nearby fans' heads.

"I thought so too," Coach Patch said. "So, heaven help the Demons."

Tony was met by his fellow forwards Bert, No. 13 and Homer, No. 5.

"Why are you here?" Bert asked.

"Coach sent me," Tony said, as if that said it all.

Bert and Homer exchanged puzzled looks. "Does he have a plan?" Homer asked.

"Yep," Tony said, "Listen." He whispered in their ears for a few seconds before the referee called out "enough chatter, let's play hockey."

Bert and Homer looked at Tony, looked one hundred metres down rink towards where their coach sat, then shrugged. "This will be interesting," Homer said, then skated off to his position on the right. Bert stayed with Tony.

Since Jack had been fouled, his replacement, Tony, had the puck. They were mid rink and fifty metres from the Demons goal. As the referee blew his whistle and pandemonium broke out in the bleachers, Tony and Bert skated together forwards and to the left, exchanging the puck in short sharp passes.

As a defender rushed towards them, Bert suddenly broke away back towards the centre. Just before the defender reached Tony, he gave the puck a sharp flick towards Bert and evaded an intentional charge by the Demon. Then he switched directions and charged after the puck.

The puck, barely touching the ice because of the low gravity, whizzed towards Bert's waiting stick, but as it reached him, Bert raised his stick slightly letting it go past, but lowering again, pretending he had trapped it. He made a pass of the imaginary puck back to Tony who had skated further forward in front of him.

Meantime, the real puck had travelled across the right side of the rink to be captured by Homer.

Tony 'trapped' the imaginary puck, skated a few metres closer to the goal with it, making threatening stares at the waiting goalie, then flicked it back to Bert.

Defenders were coming from all directions but were not certain who actually had the puck so spread out to cover the three attacking Tigers, thinning their defence.

Tony was positioned right in front of the goal, only fifteen metres out when Homer passed the puck – the real puck – to him. It was a cracker of a pass – long and fast. Then Homer chased the pass as fast as his skates would carry him.

Bert was standing only a few metres on Tony's left when the puck reached him. Tony went to trap the puck but made a mess of it and fell over in a jumble of bum, legs and stick, seeming to trap the puck beneath him. Bert skated off slowly, backwards, his stick trailing beside one of his skates. Homer, who caught up just as Tony landed on the ice, cruised past, flapping his arms and expressing frustration with his team-mates clumsiness as he joined Bert in a slow back skate around the back of the Demons goal.

All Demon defenders were gathered around Tony, using their sticks, not so gently, to prod the hidden puck from under Tony's jumbled body. Tony appeared to be trying to stand while at the same time protecting the puck. A referee approached to try to sort out the mess as the Demon fans booed the clumsy Nothill from Earth while the Tigers fans kept an embarrassed silence.

Then Tony, with his helmeted head just off the blue ice, saw Bert and Homer arrive from behind the goal and stand virtually next to the goalie who was intently watching Tony and the three defenders. He smiled, then gracefully unwound his tangled limbs, got to his knees and then slowly to his feet. The defenders sticks jabbed down to grab the puck... but it wasn't there.

Tony pointed with his long stick towards the goal just as Bert stepped aside and Homer firmly tapped the puck into the back of the net... right under the goalie's nose.

The three defenders rushed the referee, screaming "foul play, foul play."

The referee blew his whistle and made the signal for 'goal.'

Then the full time siren rang.

The Tigers had beaten the Demons 4 – 3.

The trophy was theirs.

The entire Tigers squad rushed onto the rink and joined Tony, Bert and Homer. All three were hoisted onto their team-mates shoulders and carried like the heroes they were back towards the bunker. Coach Patch was waiting for them, a hint of a smile on his lips showing through his helmet.

All this time, the crowd of Tigers fans sang and cheered "We are the Tigers, we are the Tigers, hear us Roar" until their throats hurt.

"That was some plan, Coach," Bert said as he was let down on the ground.

"What plan?" Coach Patch had been talking to Brock.

"That little imaginary puck and falling over trick," Homer said, still perched on his friends' shoulders.

"Oh, I didn't have a plan," the coach said. "That was all Nothill's idea. I just told him to go out and do whatever came into his head. Be unpredictable." Then he slapped Brock on the shoulder. "And it worked a treat."

"Well, I'll be..." Bert said.

"Me too," Homer agreed.

Back in the dressing room, helmets off, the Tigers began to really celebrate. The energy drinks had been put away and something more serious was brought out to drink. Tony settled for an Unglian soft drink, which tasted a lot like creaming soda.

Just as Coach Patch reported to the team that Jack Chance had made a full recovery and would see them back at the dome, then started to congratulate everyone, again, on their historic win, the air lock door started to open. They all turned to see who it was.

There in the doorway stood the captain and three other players from the Demons. The expressions on their faces were fierce. The Tigers all fell silent as the Demons strode into the room. Then they saw that the Demon captain held the coveted trophy in his hand, gripping it hard enough to leave a set of six fingerprints in its stem.

The Demon captain - Rock Smasher was his name – stood in the centre of the Tigers circle of players and stared at them. "This trophy," he growled, holding it up for all to see, "is rightfully ours." There was a low murmur from the Tigers. "It has been ours for years." He stared daggers at Coach Patch. "It should still be ours today."

He turned around, as if looking for someone, then he saw him.

"You," he growled even louder. He pointed a finger at Tony. "You." Rock Smasher advanced on Tony and stood almost nose to nose. Tony, understandably nervous, managed to stand his ground and stare into the Demon captain's third eye.

"You took this trophy, our trophy, from us by a sneaky, skullduggerous trick." Smasher wagged his finger under Tony's nose. "It was low down, unsporting and dishonest." He held the trophy under Tony's nose. "In fact... your deception was everything we Demons strive to achieve every match. You outplayed us at our own game." He thrust the trophy into Tony's hands. "Here, it's yours, and well deserved."

After a stunned second of silence, the Tigers burst out cheering, then rushed to offer the Demon players drinks and some nibbles.

Tony went over to Coach Patch and offered him the trophy. "Here," he said. "This is yours."

Coach Patch refused to take it. "No. It's yours for the moment. Hold on to it and enjoy the moment. Me, I'm going to have a chat with your new best friend Rock Smasher about our Captain's broken jaw."

Tony looked around him. His team mates – his new friends - were chatting with the Demons players, comparing plays and clashes, the atmosphere completely different to how it had been only fifteen minutes before on the blue ice.

What happens on the ice stays on they ice, as they say.

He looked closely at the trophy he held. A six-fingered hand holding aloft a miniature hockey stick, with a puck resting on an angle against the wrist, was sitting atop a ringed Saturn. The whole trophy was about the size of a soccer ball.

It was made out of sapphires.

Tony gasped. Back on Earth, this thing would be priceless.

He shrugged. Well, he's not back on Earth, and at the moment, his most prized possession would be another glass of creaming soda.

He walked across the room to get one.

*

"Really?" Tony said. He was completely taken by surprise by Jack Chance's proposal. He thought about it for all of five seconds, imagining what it would be like, then reality kicked in. "Ah, thanks, I'm flattered, but no thanks Jack. I have to go home."

"But you'd enjoy it here on Titan," Jack persisted. "Ice skating, skiing in the methane snow on the mountains, hang gliding. You could even come on holidays back to Unglia with me. Oh, and playing hockey with us Tigers, of course. Please, think about it."

Tony laughed. "I have thought about it, and it sounds fantastic. But Jack," he said, "I'm lonely for home. I miss Mum and Dad, my brothers. My friends."

"But we're your friends," Jack said.

"Yes, you are. I meant my five-fingered friends. Sorry."

"Oh. Oh well, I see you mean it." He clicked his fingers, having a sudden idea. "But can you leave Thor with us? The guys love him."

"No way, hosé," Tony laughed. "He comes back with me."

"We'll miss you, T. Nothill No. 11" Jack said. "Oh well, the portal's ready, so I suppose it's time. Have you got everything?"

"Everything I came with is in this bag you gave me," Tony said. "My shorts and hockey tee-shirt. That's it. I should wear those to go home, shouldn't I?"

"No, wear what you're in. Your hockey suit with your name and number. You earned it."

"Aren't you coming with me?" Tony asked, suddenly nervous about the portal trip.

"Best not," Jack replied. "Don't want to start a panic."

Tony giggled at the thought of Jack Chance, three-eyed E.T. popping out of the portal in front of a lot of Earthlings. But then again, there may be nobody there when he arrived.

"Okay, well I'd better go." Tony stood there, uncertain what to do. Jack did it for him. He took a step forward and gave Tony a big bear hug. As he did, Brock and Coach Patch appeared with Thor. When Jack had released Tony, Coach and Brock gave him a hearty hand shake.

"Anytime you have a hankering to play hockey on the blue ice, just let me know," Coach said. "There's a small transmitter in your bag you can use." He winked at Tony. "We can always use a sneaky, skullduggerous player like you."

"Thanks Coach. Well, it's time. Come on Thor, say goodbye."

Thor let out some loud barks, at which the Unglians bowed deeply to him.

Then the portal in all its pink whirlpool glory appeared in front of him. The deep wobbleboard sound from the blue rippling centre circle seemed to call for him and Tony walked steadily towards it. Just before he entered, he turned, waved at his friends, then faced the portal and stepped through. Thor was only one second behind him.

*

"What's that?" someone yelled as the whirling portal wheel appeared with a ziiiiipp in the middle of Tony's family back yard, just as it had only a week before.

There was confusion amongst the group of policemen, reporters and cameramen who had been interviewing Tony's Mum and Dad and brothers.

"There, it's just like I was telling you," Ricky cried out. "Now do you believe us?"

Before anyone could react more, a blue suited figure stepped out of the portal onto the lawn. Blue steam started to evaporate, leaving Tony in his white hockey suit. Then Tony was bowled over, again, by a blue frosted Thor who shook off his frost and ran to greet Ricky and Sam.

Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the portal ziiiiipped out of existence, leaving just a trace of methane smell behind.

A policeman pointed at Tony. "Is that...is that..?" he asked, wondering how he was going to explain all this to his boss at the police station.

"Yes, yes, it's Tony," Mrs Nothill cried, and ran to hug her son. Mr Nothill was not far behind her.

During all the hugs, Tony managed to get his hockey helmet off, then found he was totally surrounded by police and reporters, all asking a barrage of questions at the same time.

"Where have you been?" his Mum asked, ignoring the others.

"Didn't you tell them?" Tony asked Ricky.

"Yes, but I don't think they really believed me," Ricky said.

"Me either," Sam piped up.

"Sam," Tony said. "There's a small photo album in my bag. Can you get it out?"

Sam unzipped the bag and dug around the clothes. He pulled out the album and quickly flicked through it. "Wow, look at these... oh wow..."

His Dad took the album and stared at Brock's photos of the team and of the games. "Oh my," he said.

"What have you got there," the policeman in charge asked.

"Oh, just family photos," Mr Nothill fibbed, putting it in his pocket.

Suddenly there was a gasp from the crowd. Sam had pulled something else from Tony's bag and held it up to the light. It twinkled and fluoresced in dazzling blue, flashing light into the onlookers' eyes.

It was the sapphire trophy. Coach had snuck it into Tony's bag as a memento.

Everyone stared at the trophy, then turned and stared at Tony.

Tony's Mum knelt beside her son and said: "I think it's time to tell us exactly what happened to you."

Tony nodded, called Thor over and gave his neck a good rub, took hold of the trophy and winked at his brothers.

"Alright everyone, Titan your seat belts, you're in for a wild ride."

*

