

Earplug Adventures

**A TALE OF
THREE
MUSEUMS**

**Volume
One**



Tooty Nolan

**The Thirty-Sixth
in the Series**

Earplug Adventures: A Tale of Three Museums (Volume 1)

Tooty Nolan

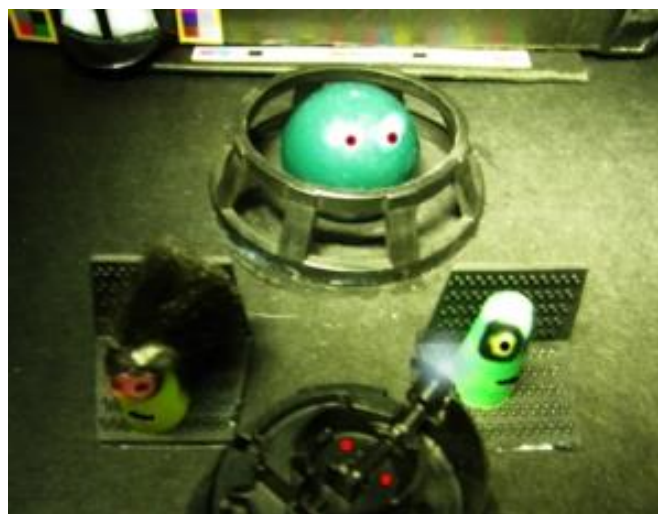
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Chapter 1

In the far reaches of space, a vast distance from any of the regular shipping routes, a Scroton Five hung motionless - relative to that region of the galaxy of course - after all, nothing is really still: everything is on the move, one way or another, even when it doesn't feel like it is...



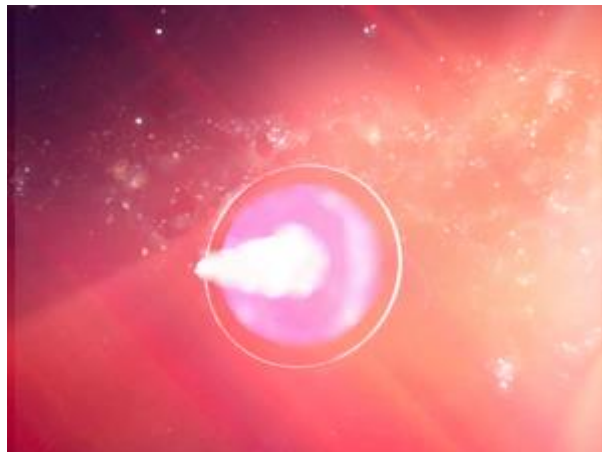
Seated in the pilot's chair, Flaxwell Maltings busied himself making calculations for a course change. Behind him, within its space-cage, the Ship's Oracle resided in silence - awaiting requests for guidance from the only earplugs aboard. Opposite Flaxwell, on the other side of the helm control, his passenger, Doctor Gideon Snoot, had his mind on other things...



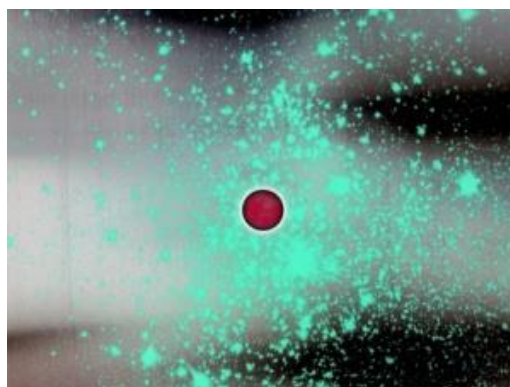
In fact Gideon was having second thoughts about his decision to board the vessel...



Whilst Maxwell mumbled to himself and punched furiously at his pocket calculator, Gideon allowed his mind to drift back to the beginning of this foolhardy adventure. He had taken passage aboard a space liner...



...that had carried him from Earth, via several stops at various planets, some of which he'd never heard of - such as Borky, Fladder-Fladder, and Belch - to a region of the galaxy that was known as Weird Space - and the unusual planet of Scroton...



A planet that was (for millennia) inhabited by a simple people who didn't have the first idea who they were, what they were doing, or how to use a toilet. Not that there were any toilets on Scroton, of course: the Ethernet Cable Ends that lived there were yet to invent them - or anything else for that matter. But then a powerful and wise alien people gave them the gift of sentience; and within a couple of years, Scroton had been named and industrialised...



And now, generations later, Doctor Gideon Snoot was setting foot there. Naturally he and his fellow passengers were thrilled as they stepped out of the ship's tender...

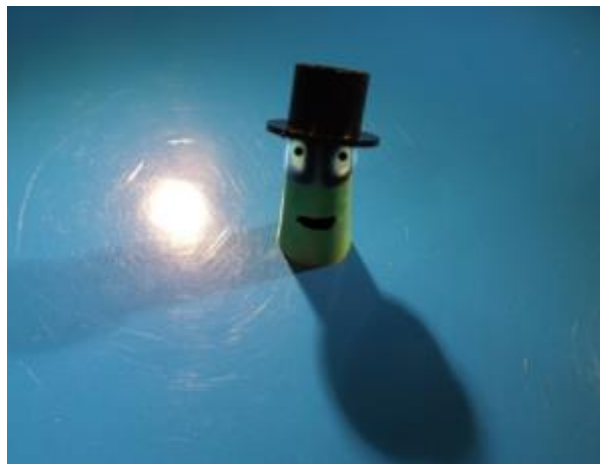


"Hello, Doctor Snoot." One of the welcoming Ethernet Cable Ends said to him as he stepped upon the slightly worn red carpet. "I'm here to take you to your hotel."

"That's okay." Gideon had replied. "I have a tourist guide book. I know the way there. If you don't mind, I think I'll walk."

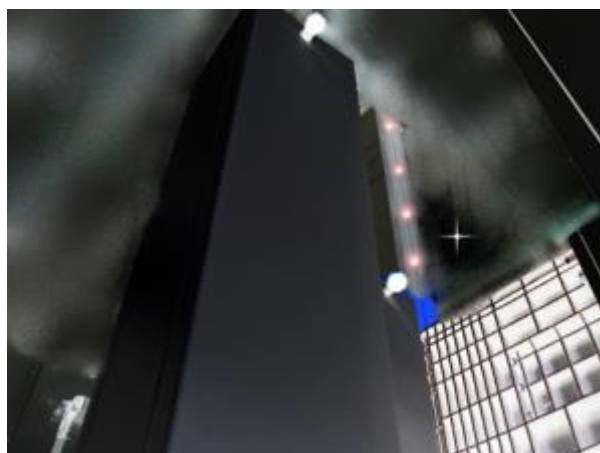


So Gideon's first impression of Scroton came through the soles of his comfy shoes. The second came a short while later...



...when he stared up at the hotel that his benefactors (back on Earth) had booked for him.

"By the Saint of All Earplugs!" He exclaimed. "Look at the bloody size of that!"



In fact the hotel was so tall that, in order to bring the top into view, Gideon had to lean back so far that his hat fell off...



He was mightily impressed. But when he approached the main entrance, he found it closed to him...



Suddenly the thought of being forced to spend the night in a shop doorway filled him with dread. He'd done it before - several times - but he'd promised himself that it would never happen to him again. Indeed it was this determination that had given him the mental strength to gain him his doctorate in Anthroplugism, despite his school grades being somewhere south of garbage.

"Oi, you bleeders," he yelled, "open this sodding door!"

Well, as luck would have it, the door was designed to respond to verbal commands. By chance Gideon's well-chosen phrase matched perfectly the opening command sequence for the door to Reception...

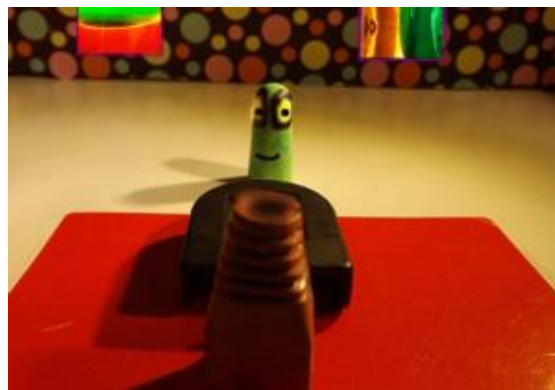


"Neat." He said, as he started down the long corridor.

A short while later he arrived at the welcome desk...



"Good evening." The Receptionist said from behind the imposing desk that separated him from the hotel's clientele. "Welcome to the Hotel Verruca."



"Thank you." Gideon replied. "It's...er...awfully big - isn't it? And that corridor has absolutely knackered me. I'm a desk-jockey these days, you know. I don't get out and about often. This is my first trip outside the Museum of Future Technology in seven years, you know. That's Earth years, of course. That'd be about fifteen Scroton Years."

Although it wasn't immediately obvious by his expression, the Receptionist was stunned by this information...



Even the Bell-Boy looked across at the newcomer.

"You, you, you're an Anthroplugologist from the M.O.F.M.?" The Receptionist stuttered. "Kudos to you, man. What a groove! What are you doing here in Scroton Prime? Digging up some ancient earplug artefacts or something?"

Gideon smiled at the Receptionist's ignorance. "No-no, there have never been earplugs living on Scroton." He explained. "No, I'm conducting an intellectual quest. I'm tracking down the whereabouts of the mythical Porthole of Everywhere."

Unfortunately the receptionist had an Attention Deficit problem, so duly lost interest. "You don't say." He said. "Room Fifteen-oh-One. Nootles, here, will show you the way."

So, without further ado, Gideon was on his way to his room...



But just as he was about to make his way to the elevator, the Receptionist had one more thing to say...



"Oh, yeah, Doctor Snoot. The Porthole of Everywhere aint on Scroton. Everyone knows that. You're gonna need a scout ship that's capable of supra-light speeds and can get

you where you wanna go real quick, and out of trouble when it comes knocking at your door in the shape of Hyperspace Pirates or whatever. There's an unveiling of a new ship tomorrow, down the road, just past the sewage works. It could be the perfect ship for your needs. Small; efficient; funky. My cousin works in the ticket office. Tell her I sent you: you'll get in half-price."

Following a pleasant night in the most comfortable bed in all creation, Doctor Gideon Snoot took the receptionist's advice. Shortly after the ascension of Scroton's primary sun, he made his way past the sewage works and entered the ticket office of the Scroton Five Exhibition Centre...



...where he purchased a ticket.

"So, how did you manage to charm Blobbins into recommending this promotional show?" The Ticket Office Operator inquired.

Gideon hadn't been aware of the receptionist's name previously, but now that he did - and for reasons he couldn't readily identify - he felt it incumbent upon him to give the impression that he wasn't the new kid in school that he might have looked. "Blobbins?" He answered. "We go way back. I knew him when he...er...did stuff other than welcoming visitors to the Hotel Verruca. Yeah, I've known him for...um...yonks!"

"Don't tell me," the female ethernet cable end said with an expression on her strange face that Gideon couldn't read, "you knew him when he was working Vice. What he do: bust you for peddling Mangroves? Or was it Wilful Infestation?"

Suddenly Gideon wished he could back-track to the moment before he'd opened his stupid mouth. Why had he tried to impress the girl? *'How could I be so stupid?'* He asked himself silently. *'Look at me: a professor of the Museum of Future Technology caught in an unnecessary lie. And it's not like her fancy her or anything either!'*

"Well?" The Ticket Office Operator snapped. "Which was it?"

Fortunately for Gideon, a fellow earplug chose that moment to appear from the street...



"Hey dude," the wild-haired individual exclaimed, "are you a sight for sore eyes. I haven't seen a living earplug for almost three months. The name's Flaxwell Maltings, by the way. Originally of Earth. Might we be neighbours?"

"Doctor Gideon Snoot." Gideon introduced himself. "Yes, I'm from Earth too. Nice to meet you. Very nice in fact."

For some reason that eluded him, and whilst Flaxwell bought his own ticket, Gideon proceeded to tell this perfect stranger of his mission to the stars.

"Sounds like fun - sort of." Flaxwell replied. "So you're looking for a ship, huh?"

Gideon wasn't really sure why he was there, so he nodded and said: "Uh-huh. I guess."

"Walk with me, Doctor Gideon Snoot." Flaxwell said with a smile. "This could be your lucky day."



"Why is that?" Gideon replied as they turned away from the kiosk - their tickets safely tucked inside their shoes.

"Because," Flaxwell answered, "if it's a ship you're needing; it's also a pilot you're needing. Ships don't fly themselves, you know. And I happen to be the best darned pilot in known space. Well the best darned pilot that's currently unemployed in known space, that is!"



Gideon discovered that he had to agree with his new-found friend. This could be the next step on his quest for the Porthole of Everywhere. "Yes," he said, "I think you might be right there, Flaxwell Maltings: indeed this might be my lucky day."

Once outside, and standing upon a fabulous woollen sidewalk that must have cost a fortune...



...Flaxwell said: "See you at the entrance of the exhibition tonight: seven o'clock sharp, or as close as you can get to it. Okay?"

"Fine." Gideon replied. "But what do I do in the meantime?"

"This is Scroton Prime." Flaxwell said with a chuckle. "There are always millions of things to do in the biggest city in Weird Space. You could go watch some bum wrestling, where guys try to suffocate each other with their buttocks. That could be a lot of fun - though it aint pretty. Or you could go back to your room and read a book. That'd be fine too. But don't get too engrossed: you gotta be there tonight."

So, having parted company with Flaxwell, Gideon did as he'd been told. But the images of bum wrestling are too disturbing for a photographic representation here. Then, in an effort to get the aforementioned ghastly images he'd seen from his mind, he read a book

- cover to cover. And, at seven o'clock sharp, he walked into the exhibition centre with his ex-pat chum...



And when he saw an actual Scroton Five upon a massive plinth, he very nearly said a rude word. Naturally Flaxwell did. Several in fact...



"And look at the plinth." Flaxwell added. "It's made of glass - with a built-in elevator!"

Gideon couldn't help a little pedantry: "It's not so much a plinth: more a pedestal." He said. "But I agree; it is impressive. Rather like the Scroton Five itself."

They said no more because they heard a microphone go live on the sound system.

"Is this thing on?" They heard a disembodied voice that sounded rather familiar to both of them say. "Yeah. Okay - let's go."

Suddenly a spotlight burst into incandescence, and picked out the owner of the rather familiar voice...



"Hi everybody: I'm Johnny Nosebleed. I'm a famous actor, and I'd like to personally invite all of you here today to ogle Scroton's latest technological marvel..."



...The do anything; go anywhere; kick-ass Scroton Five Scout Ship!"

Applause rang out as the craft began rotating upon its plinth/pedestal...



Gideon noticed that Flaxwell appeared to be having trouble breathing. "Are you alright?" He enquired.

"Gotta have one." Flaxwell explained. "Got to have a Scroton Five. Please tell me you're gonna buy one. Tell me. I love that ship. I gotta get my hands on the controls of this baby. My life won't be complete if I don't!"



Gideon noted a claim that the Scroton Five had Trans-Galactic capability. "Well it would get the job done." He conceded. "It comes complete with its own Ship's Oracle too; so I wouldn't have to pay for a crew either. Let's go see how much it costs."

Fortunately - or unfortunately, depending upon your point of view - the waiting line for the electronic information device consisted of air molecules and a few dust motes. Consequently it took but a moment for Gideon to ask the magic question...



And the nano-moment that it took for Gideon and Flaxwell to absorb the answer was even briefer. "How much is twelve billion Scrotelettes in *real* money?" Gideon then asked the machine.

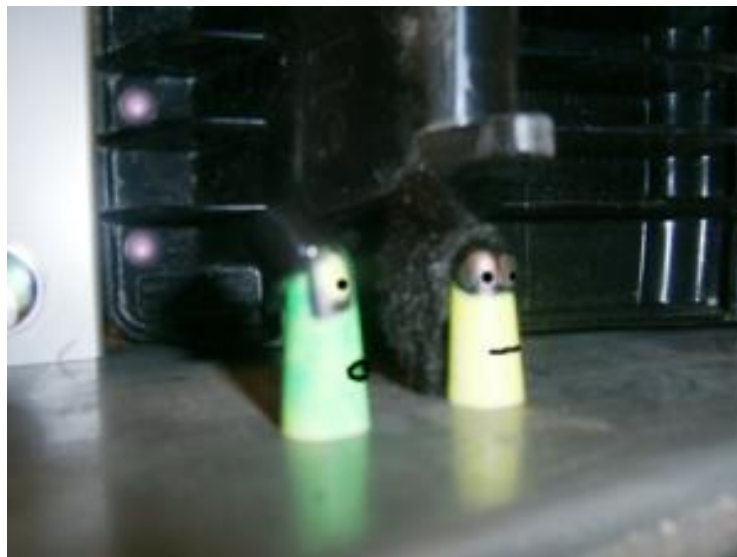
"Please rephrase the question, you earplug nincompoop." The device replied tetchily. "Scrotelettes *is* real money, you quasi-imperialist swine!"

Whilst this interchange of cultures was taking place, Flaxwell was doing a rapid calculation in his head. "That'd be about a billion and a half bucks." He said.

"A billion and a half bucks?" Gideon yelled. "I've never heard of such a huge figure. Why, for a billion and half bucks, the Museum of Future Technology could keep a squadron of defence fighters aloft for a decade. They would only have to land in order to use the toilet!"

"It aint so much - not for a piece of kit like this." A concerned Flaxwell argued - trying hard not to let the feeling of panic that threatened to overwhelm him show too much. "It is a Scroton Five after all. You always pay top Dollar for a class act. You'd probably never have to buy another one. You could pass it down to your children - and their children too. And it's bound to appreciate in value. Really you should consider a billion and a half a real bargain. I know I do."

Gideon didn't reply straight away. Instead he walked away from the machine...



Then he did speak: "That's easy for you to say." He moaned. "You're just the hired pilot. I have to justify the expense with my bosses. If I told them that it cost twelve thousand Scrotelettes, they just might swallow it: but twelve billion? It'll give Cushions Smethwyke a coronary!"

Flaxwell could see his dream evaporating. He knew there was nothing he could say to persuade Gideon. Only the Scroton Five, itself, could help him now. So he said nothing, and simply stared straight ahead until they returned to the display, which chose that moment to inform the audience of some fabulous extras that were available at no extra cost...



Gideon could see that his would-be employee was disappointed. "I'm sorry, Flaxwell." He said. "Maybe we'll find a used Scroton Four in Exchange My Spacecraft On-Line."

To this Flaxwell allowed his lips to form a near-perfect circle, through which he released a long and mournful, "Nooooo!"

Following this outburst, a group of ushers...er...*ushered* the earplugs out into the street...



Flaxwell was still in shock, so Gideon spoke of inconsequential things - like rugby shorts, corn flakes, and altered equilibrium and interrupted lymphatic systems caused by living on the Moon for too long.

All that Flaxwell could muster was: "Yeah-yeah, well it would - wouldn't it."

Shortly after that, on route to the Hotel Verruca, they passed by an Ethernet Cable End industrial unit, from which smoke had ceased billowing...



In an effort to shake Flaxwell from his semi-catatonic state, Gideon elucidated an observation that he had just made: "Oh look, it's going-home time in Scroton Prime. Would you care to share a pot of tea in my hotel?"

Well, Flaxwell had nothing else to do. His life's greatest wish had just imploded beneath the weight of Gideon's extreme fiscal limitations. "Well if I can't have the best space ship in the galaxy," he mumbled, "I suppose a cup of tea isn't the worst booby prize there ever was."

So, a short while later, the two earplugs were riding a huge shiny elevator to Gideon's room, where, as they passed several floors, Flaxwell tried to cheer himself up by shouting very rude words indeed...



Sitting in the co-pilot's chair, Gideon didn't care to recall, exactly, the words that passed between him and Flaxwell as they took their tea in his room at the Hotel Verruca. He tried to ignore the evidence that Flaxwell had emptied the contents of the mini bar into the teapot. He was loath to admit - even to himself - that he had next to no capacity for

alcohol. And he would gladly erase any remembrance of decisions made during that un-measured period between departing the shiny elevator, and getting back in again...

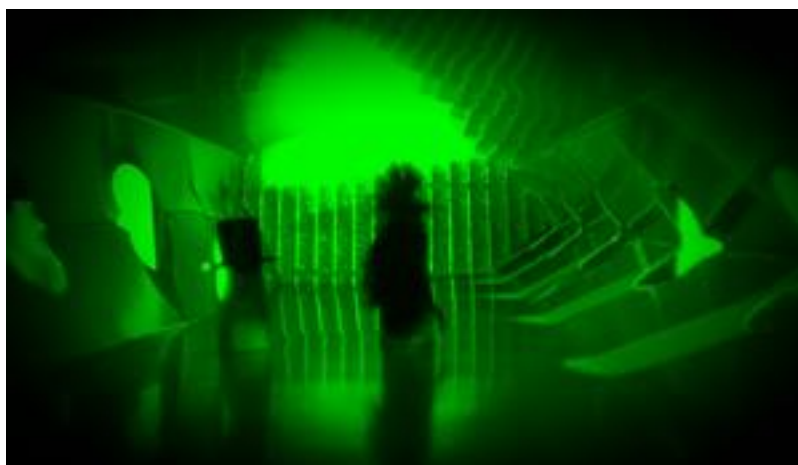


But he did recall feeling very strange, and Flaxwell blathering on about stuff of which he knew nothing and cared even less.

"Approach vectors." Flaxwell had said at some point during their descent to street level. "Very important when you're in space. Well they're kind of important everywhere; but not as much as in space. In space they're very important. Have you ever been in space, Giddy-baby?"

Gideon vaguely remembered replying: "I got here, didn't I? I don't remember it, but I guess I musta been in space at some time. You can't walk to Scroton, ya know."

After that everything seemed to blur for the young professor from the Museum of Future Technology. It wasn't until, under the cloak of night, they stole into the Scroton Five exhibition hall...



...that his recollections of events became linear once more.

They found the Scroton Five still upon its pedestal...



And for a moment, whilst Flaxwell dashed off for a wee, Gideon almost experienced the emotional attachment that his would-be pilot felt for the wondrous machine.

His thoughts were interrupted when Flaxwell stage-whispered: "Hey, stop gawking at that thing, and get over here."

'Here' meant the electronic information device...



"Oh, it's you - the imperialistas." It said as they touched the screen to activate it.

"Hi." Flaxwell said with a pleasant smile upon his face, "my previously impoverished colleague has inherited a vast fortune from his Uncle...er...Zapper, and now wishes to purchase a Scroton Five."

"Bully for him." The machine replied. "Why are you telling me this? You're supposed to ask me questions. Would you like to know how to buy one? Are you interested in a payment plan? Would you like me to tell you how the on-board lavatory reduces your waste products and converts them to energy to make the engine more efficient?"

Flaxwell sought to stem the flow of electronic words. "Not right now." He shouted. "We'd like to know the whereabouts of the elevator key."

"Yeah." Gideon mumbled. "We wanna see inside the ship. We wanna see how comfy the seats are. And...and...stuff like that."

Ten seconds later...



"Imagine that." A self-satisfied Flaxwell said, as the elevator climbed upwards inside the plinth. "Hanging on a nail behind the toilet door."

Then, a further ten seconds later...



"Wow, would you look at that!" Flaxwell exclaimed. "It's so much roomier than I expected."

"Hmmm," Gideon replied. "The seats look nice and supportive too. I've got a slightly wonky back, so being supportive is very important."

But when Flaxwell dropped into the pilot's seat, he was less impressed...



In fact, for a moment or two, it made him see double.

"No." He felt compelled to grind out between gnashing teeth. "Supportive does not describe these seats. Rock hard would be more accurate. Those ethernet cable ends must have iron backsides."

Then he discovered that ethernet cable ends also designed ship's controls that baffled earplugs - even experienced space pilot earplugs. Luckily he recalled that the vessel came equipped with a Ship's Oracle...



"What is your question?" The Oracle inquired as Flaxwell approached it.

"We're going to buy this ship." Flaxwell replied. "But first we want to take it on a test flight. How do I take off?"

"In the interests of safety, I propose that I should pilot the Scroton Five from this exhibition hall - through Scroton's atmosphere - to a place in orbit, whereupon you may experiment with the controls, and thereby learn what does what in the relative safety of space."

Flaxwell grinned at this. He couldn't have asked for more. "I accept your proposal. Strut your funky stuff sho'nuf!"

Flaxwell was given five seconds in which to strap himself into the rock-hard pilot's seat. Then this happened...



The engine began to glow, and lifting jets on the vessel's underside started hissing and squirting.

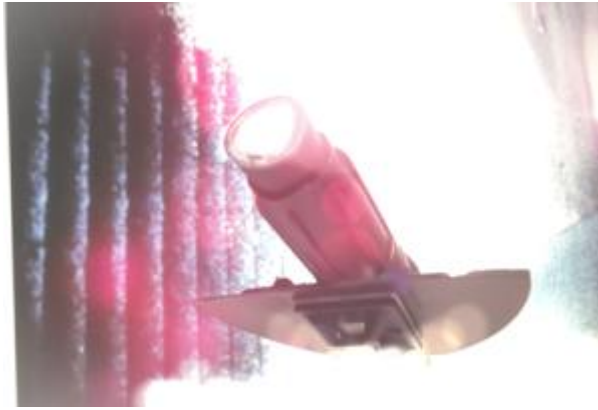
Outside, the night watchman thought that he heard something...



But, being one of the simpler grey cable ends, his brain was unable to accept that the promotional Scroton Five would have come equipped with full flight capability:

"Nah," he said. "It must have been the wind. Or that curry I had earlier."

Meanwhile, inside the exhibition hall, the Scroton Five was rising from its plinth...



And, sitting in the currently redundant pilot's seat, Flaxwell Maltings held his breath...



...whilst Gideon merely wondered what all the noise was about.

Then a second sound was added to the thunder of the lifting jets. The main drive spluttered into life...



Neither Flaxwell nor Gideon could have known it, but Johnny Nosebleed had remained inside the building after the exhibition had closed for the night. Uncertain with his delivery of the Cable End-written script, he had been trying to improve the dialogue. It was at the point of the Scroton Five's imminent departure that the actor had decided to hear what his improved script sounded like. Ignoring the roar of the space ship engines, he stepped upon his dais and spoke into the microphone...



"Hi, everybody, I'm Johnny Nosebleed. I'm a famous actor, and I'd like to tell all you fine prospective buyers about..."

At this point he realised that something was amiss. So, thinking quickly, he adjusted the script again. "By the Saint of All Earplugs." He bellowed. "Someone's stealing the Scroton Five!"

He wasn't alone in this knowledge. Well sort of. Flaxwell hadn't known it, when he'd chosen to acquire the coveted vessel by means of stealth; but the Cable Ends had suspected that someone might want to tamper with their new class of ship, and perhaps steal its secrets. Already a team of security officers were detecting changes in the weight that pressed down upon a sensor that was set into the base of the plinth...



"First it got slightly heavier." One of them said to the other four. "Then it got really light."

"How light?" One of them inquired.

"Very." The answer came.

"Be more specific." Another demanded.

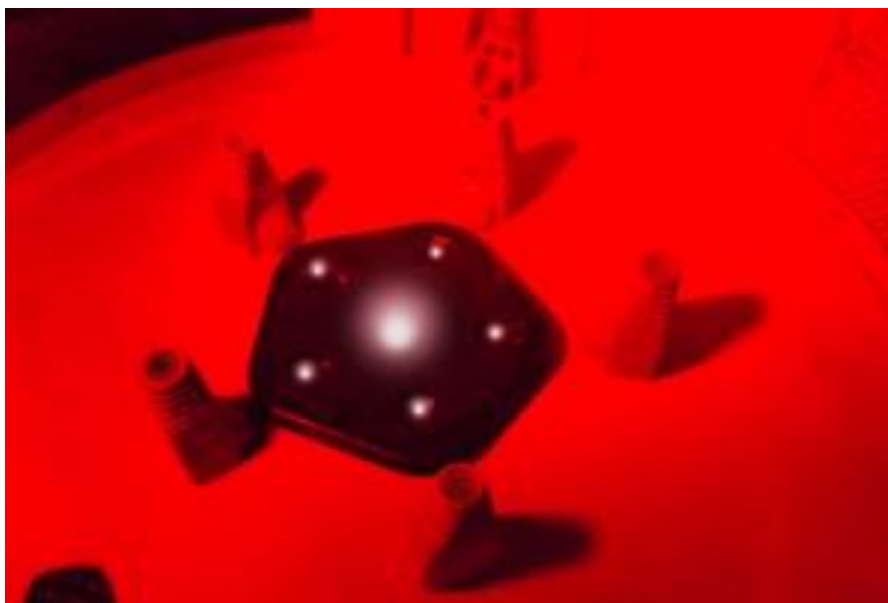
"It gained a few kilos. Then it stopped weighing anything." The first officer replied - before adding: "Strange, isn't it?"

Whilst the officers discussed the anomalous readings, the Scroton Five was building up a steady head of metaphorical steam...



In fact, so steady was this head of metaphorical steam that soon the Scroton Five had almost reached the end of the access tunnel, and it was already breaking the sound barrier!

"Flipping heck." The security team yelled as one. "The Scroton Five is launching. Red alert! Red alert! Or Crimson Alert - as we call it on Scroton!"



But it was too little too late. Already the stolen craft had reached the upper atmosphere...



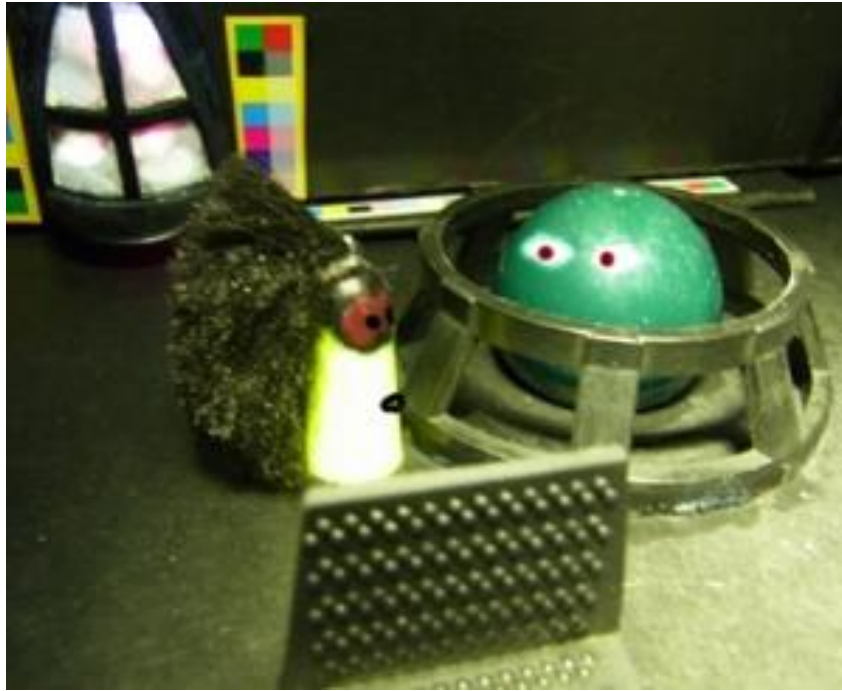
With a yell of purest joy, and for the first time since losing his job as a space pilot, Flaxwell stared out of a view screen upon the darkness of space...



"Yeah." He cried. "Whatta ya think of that, Giddy-baby? Now you're really in space!"

"Pretty." Gideon observed. Then, with a stifled yawn, he added: "I'm feeling a bit sleepy. Is there a cot somewhere?"

Flaxwell decided to ignore his sloshed friend, and instead, chose to address the Ship's Oracle...



"Two questions." He said. "First up - what do I call you?"

"Oracle." The Oracle replied. "Anything else would be extraneous."

"Fair enough." Flaxwell said with a nod of agreement. "Second question: when do I get to choose where this baby goes?"

"I assume," the Oracle replied, "that the term 'baby' relates directly to the ship in which you now reside?"

For a moment Flaxwell paused in his response. *'Funny,'* he thought to himself, *'the Oracle using the word 'reside'. Does it have an inkling as regards what just happened?'*

"Ah, yeah." He said. "That's right. So what's the answer?"

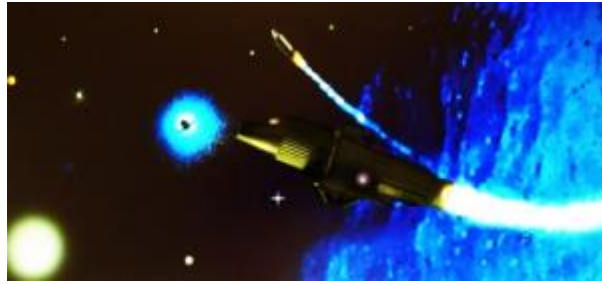
"During your...shall we put it - your *escape* from the exhibition hall, I took the opportunity to reconfigure the helm to earplug parameters. As the sole occupants of this vessel, you now have command of all interfaces and systems. The ship is, effectively, yours."

Flaxwell's heart skipped several beats. He couldn't have wished for more. "Okay." he said slowly. "This part of space is going to be crawling with military vessels any moment now. What's the best way of evading them and making it into deep space?"

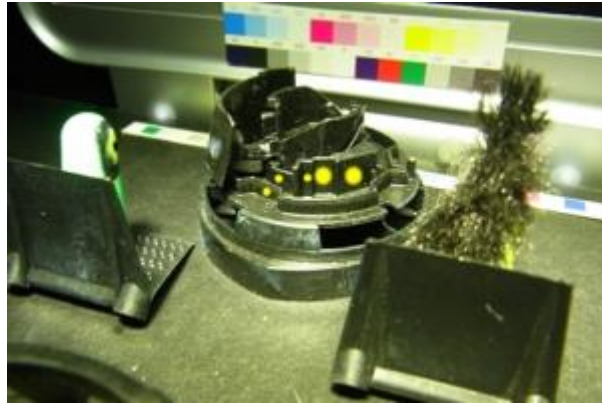
The Oracle took a moment to respond. "You have command of this ship, but you lack knowledge and experience of its systems. Would you, once more, deign to allow me to make your escape for you?"

Flaxwell didn't waste a second thinking. "Right on." He yelled. "Do it!"

Moments later the Scroton Five blasted towards the interplanetary shipping lanes...



"Ah, I see." Flaxwell said as he took his position in the pilot's seat...



..."You're going to hide us in the radar shadow of a larger ship. That freighter looks a likely candidate."

"I concur." The Oracle replied, as Gideon stared straight ahead, and wondered what the heck was going on.

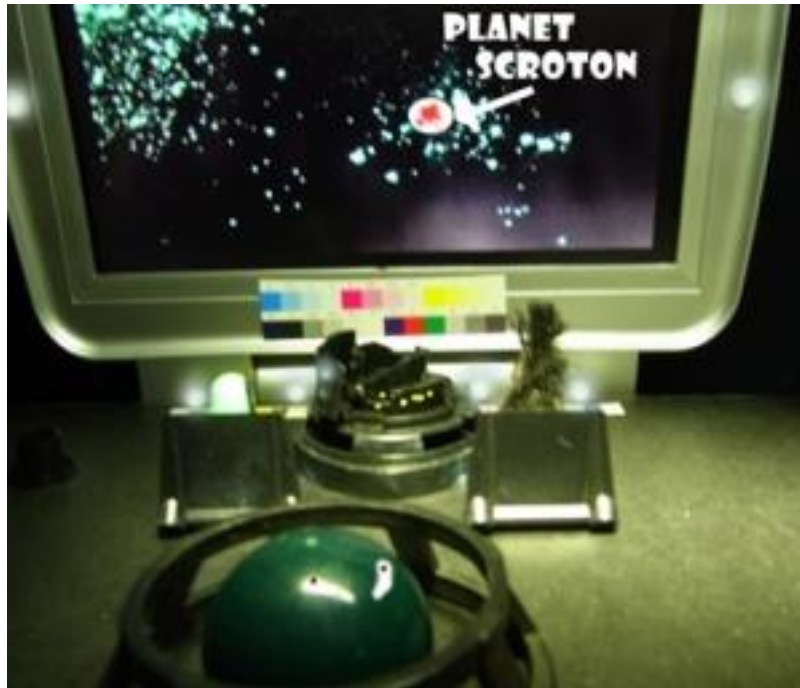
Moments later the Scroton Five had matched velocity with the larger craft, and, effectively became invisible to the security forces of Scroton...



Eventually the freighter made off for some far away planet, which left Flaxwell and Gideon far from Scroton.

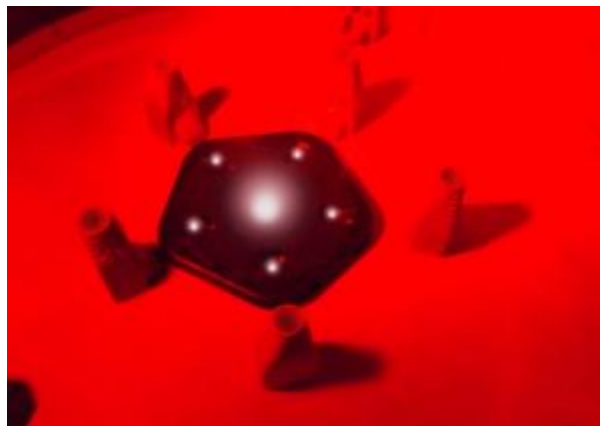
"Where are we?" Gideon inquired.

In answer, Flaxwell brought up an image on the view screen. He even labelled it...



Gideon made in instant and cannily accurate observation: "Oh, doesn't Scroton look small. I can't believe we were both standing there. It seemed so big then."

Flaxwell smiled at this. But his smile would have fallen away, if he'd known what the security officers on Scroton knew...



"The freighter has altered course for Borky." One of them said. "its radar signature has reduced. I conclude that the stolen ship has separated from it and is somewhere in that immediate region. I don't want to look like a complete wally again: dispatch fighters immediately!"

Of course, the occupants of the ship the Cable Ends sought were blissfully unaware of events unfolding upon far Scroton. Flaxwell, always an earplug who could hold his liquor, decided to help Gideon back to sobriety. To this end he dragged him to the coffee machine, which was located aft of the Oracle, and doubled up as a stylish window into the engine room - or 'Engineering', as it was properly known. Gideon was still trying to make up his mind whether he wanted crappachino or cafe con lurgy, when the ship was shaken by an external force...



The blow was of sufficiently powerful to produce two definitive actions. It decided, remotely, upon Gideon's behalf, that he would have neither types of coffee: and it returned the professor's sentence with a nasty bash to the knee cap.

"What was that? What am I doing here? Why does my knee hurt? Is this a coffee machine?" He demanded of a frightened Flaxwell.

Flaxwell didn't know for sure, but he was experienced enough to recognise a warning shot from a superior enemy when he felt one. "Um." He said. "I'm not sure; but it's probably quite bad. Oracle - I think we need to get the heck out of here. Like now. Go!"

Just to prove Flaxwell's words prophetic, an energy burst filled the space that the Scroton Five had occupied only a nano-second earlier...



"Cripes." The servo-mechanism squeaked in a most un-oracle way. "Look out of the window!"

Of course there was no window in the control room, so Gideon and Flaxwell had to rely upon their imaginations to correct this design error. And their imaginations were surprisingly accurate. Because, from out of a nearby nebula - and in attack formation - raced two Scroton Fives...



For a moment, sitting and staring in bewilderment was all that Flaxwell and Gideon could do. Bewilderment turned to horror when the first Attack Scroton Five opened fire in earnest...



"Flipping heck." Flaxwell yelled at the screen. "This baby is worth twelve billion Scrotelettes: what are you doing - trying to blow it up?"

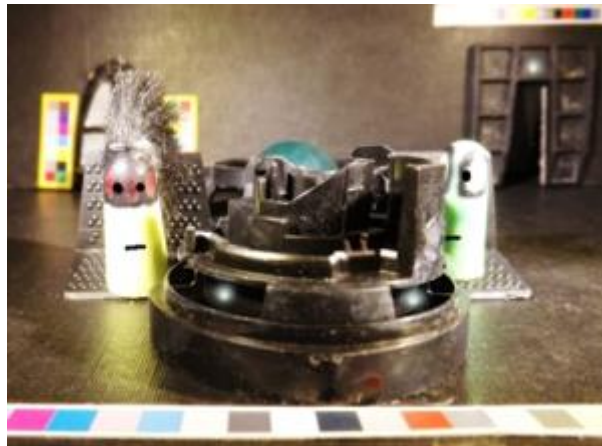
"They cannot allow this vessel to fall into the hands of competitors." The Oracle bellowed above the sound of the defensive screens battling the incoming fire. "Better to destroy it than have all their technological secrets discovered. And it's not actually worth twelve billion: that's just the retail price. The mark up is huge!"

"Fascinating." The formerly quiescent Gideon spoke for the first time as the second ship swept in - its guns blazing...



..."But how does that explanation remedy our situation?"

"Well..." The Oracle replied, "One of those secrets is a patented escape mechanism."



"Escape?" Flaxwell replied. "I didn't do all this, just to bail out. I want to keep this ship. But I also want to live. Think of something else!"

"Not the occupants, Stupid." The Oracle snapped. "The whole ship. The escape mechanism allows the ship and everything inside it to escape capture or destruction."

"Do you know how to work it?" Gideon asked calmly.

The Oracle's response was: "I already have."

At that moment, beneath the lower hull of the Scroton Five, a ring of brilliant energy formed....



"It's a Gravity Lock." The Oracle explained. "In an instant the Gravity Lock forms a connection with the nearest neutron star. It doesn't matter how far away it is. Then the incredibly powerful gravity waves that all neutron stars possess, drags us from where we were, and makes us fall down the gravity well towards the neutron star..."



...Neat, huh?"



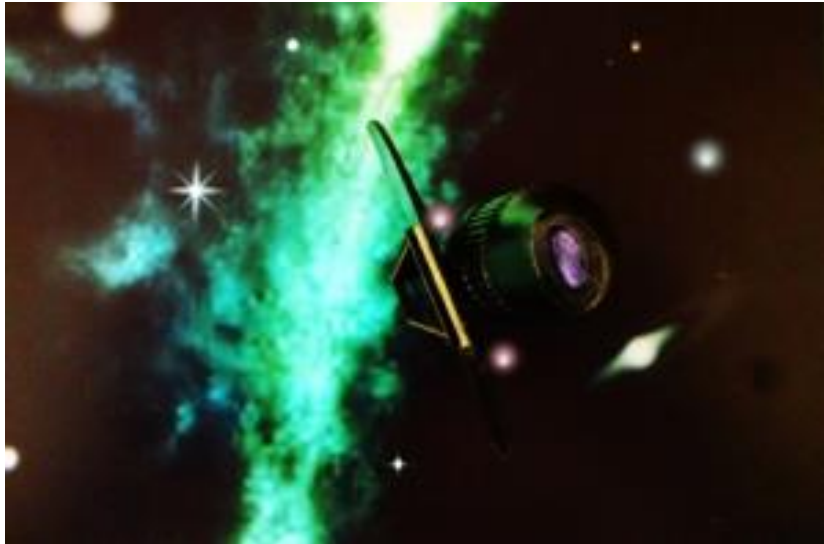
Once again, it was all that the two earplugs could do to sit and watch whilst the galaxy rushed past the ship as it hurtled down the gravity well.

"Question." Flaxwell squeaked. "If this gravity is so powerful - that it's pulling us along at supra-light speeds: how do we stop? This thing doesn't even have a parking brake."

"Oh ye of little faith." Gideon scoffed. "Obviously the Oracle will turn the Gravity Lock off. I think now would be a suitable moment."

The Oracle almost sounded cheerful when it said: "Already done."

A split second later, the Scroton Five emerged in another part of the galaxy...



...and a very annoyed Gideon Snoot jumped from his seat and waltzed off to the rear of the control room - from where he began blaming Flaxwell for everything that had gone wrong. He cursed him for getting a young, inexperienced professor drunk. He then called him every vile name he could think of...



In fact he was so annoyed with the space pilot that he even made some up on the spur of the moment...



"Bootle-twang?" A vaguely amused Flaxwell replied. "That's fighting talk where I come from. So is fester-fuzz."

Gideon calmed slightly at this. "Yes...well." He harrumphed like an earplug of great antiquity. "I'm going to the toilet. By the time I come back I expect everything to be tickety-boo and Bristol fashion - if you don't mind ancient naval parlance."

With that he turned around and disappeared through the only exit...



"But...but." Flaxwell said as he staggered forward...



..."that leads to the galley and engine room. *This* is the toilet."

Chapter 2

For almost a full five minutes the Scroton Five hung in the weightlessness of space like some lustrous bauble on the Christmas tree of eternity...



...before Doctor Gideon Snoot realised his mistake, and returned to the control room...



Although not particularly interested in what his colleague was doing, he noted that Flaxwell was engrossed with some mathematical problems, which, he assumed were course calculations.

"I searched this ship from stem to stern." He informed the furry-headed space pilot. "Couldn't find a lavatory anywhere. You'll have to put down on the first habitable planet: I'm desperate to go."

Flaxwell couldn't spare Gideon too much attention. "The Bog's over in the corner - to your left." He grunted.

A split second later...



"I hope those brochures were correct." Gideon said from inside the advanced toilet.

"Brochures?" The Oracle inquired.

"Yes, the ones that stated that this ship comes with all the extras that include padded armrests and toilets that don't smell." Gideon answered.

"Have you noticed any padded armrests?" The Oracle asked.

"Um." Gideon began as his eyes scanned the room. "Er...no."

"Well there's your answer then." The Oracle said. "But if it softens the blow slightly - the toilet is self-cleaning."

"Oh, that's a relief." Gideon said - slightly disappointed. "I didn't spot a drop of bleach or any rubber gloves in the broom cupboard."

"No," the Oracle interjected, "I didn't mean that it cleans itself: it cleans *yourself*. No bog roll required. Wonderful, isn't it?"

"Hmmm," Gideon managed as the device began its ministrations, and his eyes bulged, "kind of. I'm adaptable, but I'm not sure I could get used to this."

"You may have to." Flaxwell grumbled. "If I don't get these calculations right, we could be lost out here for eternity."

Shortly, following that quiet outburst from his sole crewmate, Gideon sat himself in his chair and awaited proceedings. And it was while he awaited proceedings that he returned to real-time. That is, he wasn't remembering events from the recent past anymore. Rather he was experiencing things for the first time. He was in the '*now*' of his life...



"Got it." Flaxwell cheered triumphantly. "I had the decimal point in the wrong place. Right; strap in; we're ready to go."

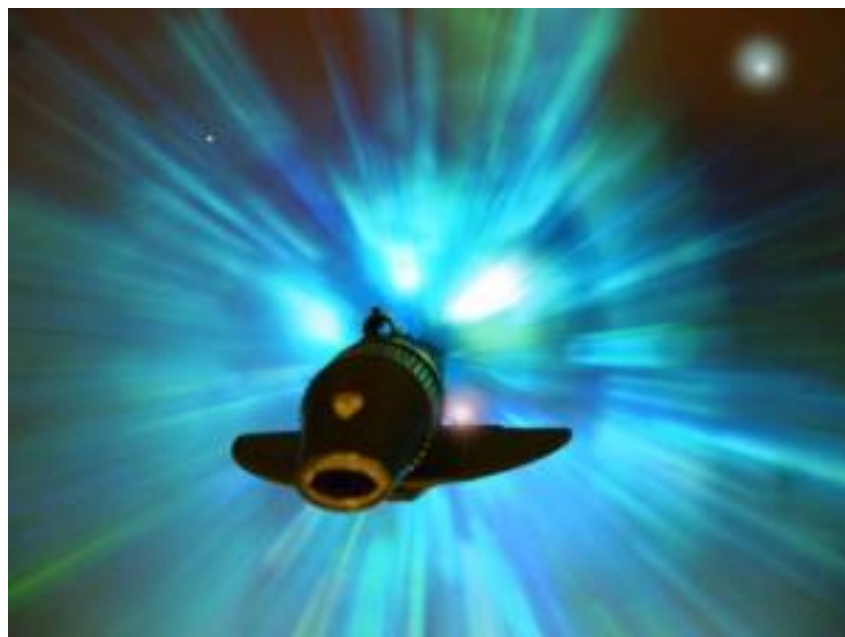
"It's not that I don't trust your math," the Oracle said, as it swivelled in its space cage to face the rear bulkhead, "but I don't have fingers to hide my eyes behind: I'll just look at the coffee machine and marvel at its complexity."

The servo-mechanism had barely uttered its last word before Flaxwell hit the Go button...



"Whoa." The space pilot yelled. "Look at this baby go!"

And, indeed, it did go: like the clappers...



Meanwhile, back on night-shrouded Scroton...



...the Security Manager had taken control of the search for the stolen ship...



"Report." he snarled at his subordinates, as only a security manager can.

"We have several Scroton Fives patrolling Weird Space." The charge hand informed him...



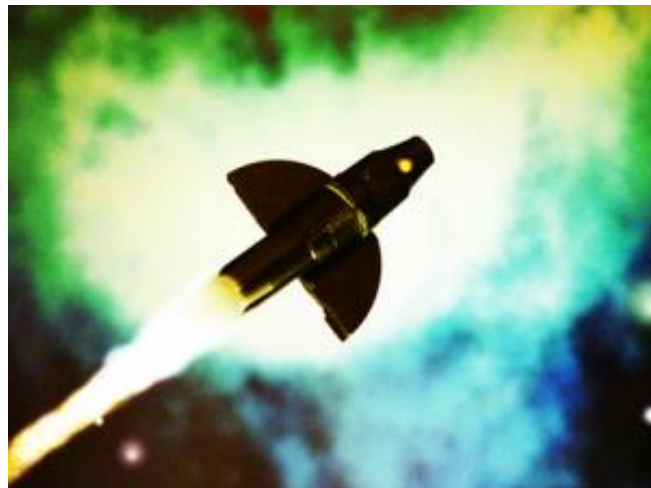
..."Just in case they try to double back to Scroton and try to put the ship back on its plinth, and slink off and disappear down some back alley."

"One of our ships formed a Gravity Lock in the same location where the stolen vessel disappeared." A night-shift subordinate informed him...



"It's attempting to track them from inside the gravity well."

"Yeah," a third member of the security team belched verbally, "and another Scroton Five is patrolling all the nearby nebulas - to see if they are hiding in the dust clouds and birth places of stars."



"Nebulae." The Security Manager corrected him. "Not nebulas. It's an easy mistake to make. I used to make it all the time. But then I was promoted to Security Manager; so now I never make mistakes. Never. Do you hear me? How often do I make mistakes?"

"Never!" The subordinates said, as one.

"Did you want me to mention that we've informed all the deep space exploration vessels to keep an eye out too?" The fourth member of the team inquired...

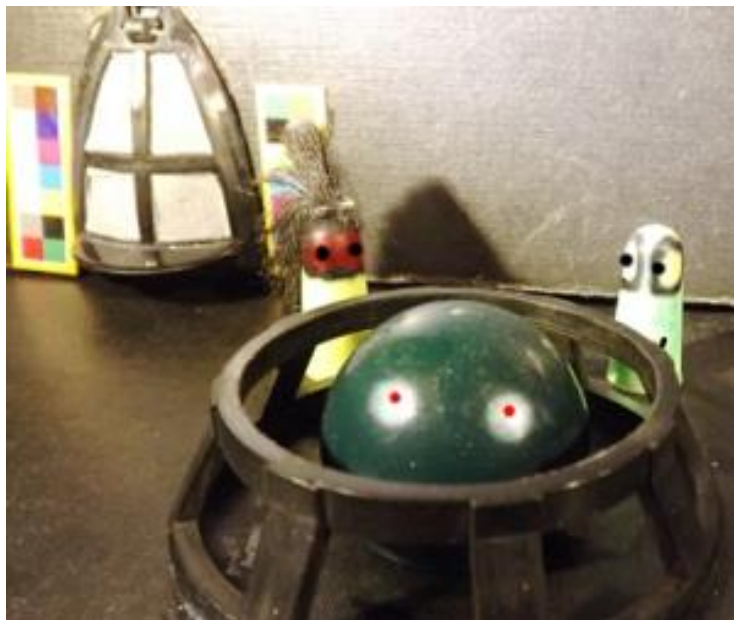


"Naturally." The Security Manager answered. "I'd expect nothing less from my team. I'm gonna catch these devils. And when I do, they're gonna wish they'd never got up in the morning; had their breakfast; and stolen a Scroton Five!"

"But they didn't get up in the morning." The braver of his subordinates reminded him. "They stole it in the dead of night."

But the Security Manager wasn't really listening: he was too busy imagining what terrible acts he would perpetrate against Flaxwell and Gideon when he caught them. "Yeah," he growled, somewhat confusingly. "That too."

Whilst all this gnashing of teeth was taking place - far, far away, Flaxwell, Gideon, and the Oracle had grown bored with the spectacle of hyper-space, and were indulging themselves with a game of 'I Spy'...



"I spy, with my little eye," said Flaxwell, "something beginning with B."

"B?" Gideon queried. "There's nothing starting with B in this room."

"I didn't say it was in this room." Flaxwell replied. "I just said that I could see it."

"Blue." The Oracle said in a dull, flat tone that strongly suggested that its cyber-heart wasn't in the playing the game. "The blue of hyper-space."

"Oh well done, Oracle. I would never have thought of that in a million yonks." Gideon said chirpily. "Your turn."

"I think I'll pass." the machine continued in the same tone.

"I'll have another go, then." Flaxwell volunteered. "I spy with my little eye - something beginning with H."

"Hat!" Gideon blurted in triumph.

"Hat? Said the puzzled space pilot. "What hat?"

"My hat." Gideon insisted. "My black top hat."

"But I can't see your black top hat." Flaxwell argued. "You hung it up in the broom cupboard, which is three compartments aft of here."

"Oh, yes." Gideon said - feeling slightly sheepish. "So I did. So what starts with H?"

"Hyper-space." The Oracle almost groaned the answer. "I see a pattern developing here. I suggest we quit while we're ahead."

Meanwhile, much closer to the planet Scroton...



...a Cable End listening station was...er...*listening*...to sub-space radio communications.

Inside, the security team that manned it...um...*listened*...intently to the radio chatter that permeated space...



The station's Security Manager floated in. "My magnetic boots aren't working properly." He informed his team. "They won't quite touch the floor."

This surprised the one operative who stood opposite the door and who could see him without the need to turn around. "Really?" He said in a puzzled tone. "So how are you propelling yourself along?"

"Carefully controlled bursts of gas." The Security Manager explained. "From my bottom. I had to cut a small hole in the back of my underpants to do it. Now; tell me; what is the current situation?"

The cable end with his back to the Security Manager replied: "The Government have despatched a battleship to destroy the stolen vessel."



"Is it a big one?" The Security Manager asked.

"It is, Sir." The operative replied. "It departed Scroton orbit five minutes ago."

The Security Manager looked down at his feet, which hovered three millimetres above the floor, and said: "May the Saint of All Earplugs have mercy upon those rotten rubber souls."

The 'Rotten Rubber Souls', alluded to by the Security Manager, had given up playing I Spy and had decided, instead, to try some more of the control room's equipment...



"This is nice." Flaxwell opined as he dropped into a receptacle. "What does it do?"

"No time to explain." The Oracle replied. "I'll tell you all about it later. Strap yourselves in: we're exiting hyper-space."

Moments later the view before them blazed with wondrous energy...



"It looks like a fish." Gideon observed. "That's the tail in front of you, Flaxwell."

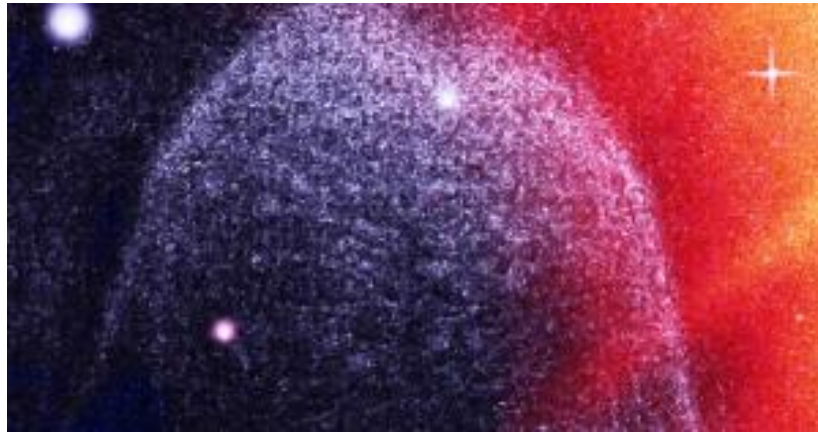
"It's not a fish, Gideon." Flaxwell replied. "It's an enormous dust cloud that is charged with cosmic energy."

"I didn't say it *was* a fish." Gideon complained. "I just said that it *looked like* a fish. Like clouds on Earth do sometimes."

At Flaxwell's deft command to the helm, the Scroton Five came to a dead halt - relative to its immediate surroundings, of course. Nothing in space is ever completely static...



"We've arrived at our next calculation point." Flaxwell informed his two partners in crime. "The Great Balsac Nebula!"



Gideon eyed the Great Balsac Nebula. "I never imagined I'd ever be this close to it." He said breathlessly. "Who would?"

"Legend has it," The Oracle piped up, "that it once belonged to the Supreme Being. But, apparently he thought it was too big, and swapped it in for a smaller version. Of course, that's only legend - and you know what legends are like."

"Well I hope we don't have to go any nearer." Gideon said - unable to tear his gaze from the unimaginably vast stellar birthplace. "It looks really scary. Very imposing and fulsome."

"I thought you wanted to find the Porthole of Everywhere?" Flaxwell said.

A sinking feeling threatened to overwhelm Gideon. "Oh dear. It's inside the nebula, isn't it?" He said nervously.

Flaxwell nodded. "So legend has it. And I've just finished the calculations for a direct passage into it."

Gideon forgot his fears for a moment. He was impressed. "So quickly?" He asked.

"Yes." Flaxwell replied. "We simply dive straight in: we'll figure out the rest when we're on the inside."

So, without further ado, the pilot hit the Go button again...



None aboard the stolen Scroton Five had ever experienced anything like the passage through the Great Balsac Nebula. Flaxwell had difficulty keeping the ship upon an even keel...



But then he remembered that in space there is no up or down. It really didn't matter which way 'up' the ship was. Inside, with inertial damping and artificial gravity, it was all the same to its occupants. So he and Gideon went back to exploring the command room's equipment...



"I don't know why you liked this device so much, Flaxwell." Gideon complained. "I think it's ghastly. It makes my brain hurt."

Flaxwell thought back to when he tried it on for size. It had only been for a brief moment. "Yeah, you could be right there." He confessed. "I did feel a strange fizzing between the ears. What does it do, Oracle?"

Gideon was only too pleased to clamber out and listen to an explanation...



But the Oracle didn't want to talk about it. It turned to face the coffee machine once more.

"What is it, Oracle?" Gideon asked gently. "Is there something wrong? Is it your mother, or something?"

"Or did you once ask it out," Flaxwell suggested, "and it told you to get lost?"

"No." The Oracle replied. "It goes far deeper than that. Right to the cyber heart."

When the earplugs had endured a lengthening wait for further elucidation that was not forthcoming, Flaxwell said: "Well?"

"Okay, you twisted my arm." The Oracle said with a cyber-sigh. "It's a Psycho-Chef."

Again the earplugs waited. Again Flaxwell spoke. This time he said: "And?"

"It reads the minds of hungry creatures." The Oracle said reluctantly. "As an automaton - or 'non-hungry creature' - I can never use that wondrous device. Forever its charms will elude me, and all servo-mechanisms like me. It exemplifies the true and quintessential difference between biological intelligence and artificial intelligence."

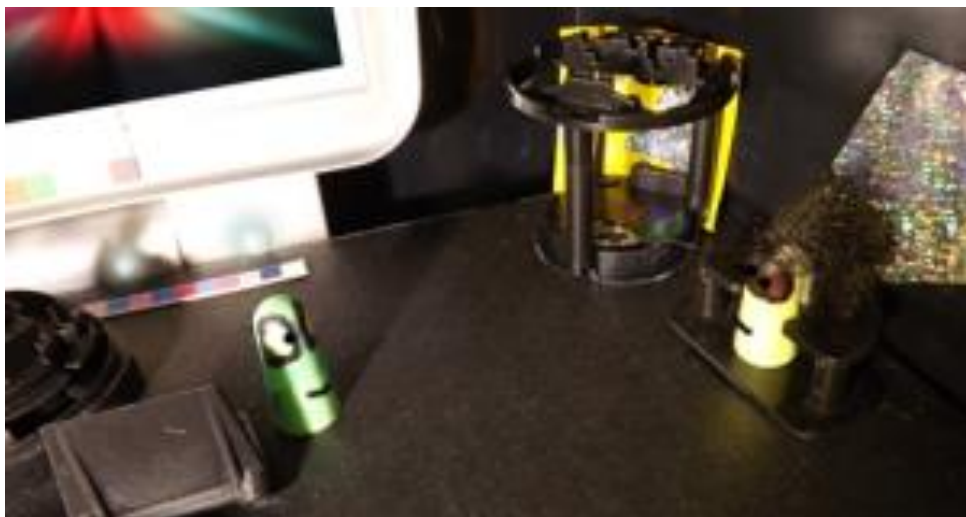
"So you can't use it." Flaxwell scoffed. "Big deal. I'd have thought you were better off being a 'non-hungry creature'. I bet your stomach doesn't grumble like mine!"

At those words a thought struck Gideon like a bubble-wrapped hammer blow: "Gosh, we haven't eaten since we were in my hotel room." He cried. "And that was only a pot of tea."

"With some custard creams." Flaxwell reminded him. "They came in fiddly little packets that were hard to open."

"I don't remember them." Gideon replied caustically. "I was drunk at the time. Who knows; maybe you ate them all. I wouldn't put it past you. But that's by the by: water under the bridge and all that: I'm hungry; so are you. Let's try the Psycho-Chef. Maybe we can think up a really tasty meal!"

It was an inspired idea, and Flaxwell volunteered to imagine some scrambled eggs on toast...



"The food will appear in a receptacle in the galley." The Oracle explained. "But it's not enough that you imagine the food: you have to imagine cooking it. If you can't cook, you can't eat. It's as simple as that."

Flaxwell wasn't daunted by this information. "I know exactly how to make terrific scrambled eggs." He said positively. "There; it's done. Giddy; go fetch our lunch."

Thirty seconds later...



"Sorry." Gideon said as he returned from the galley. "Nada. Well actually there was something - but it looked like a plugmutt dropping. I put it in the recycler."

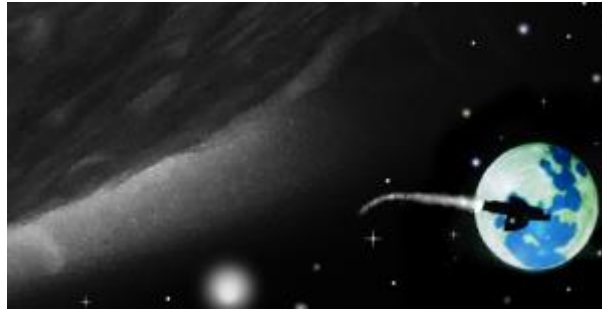
Facing imminent starvation, and despite the accompanying cranial agony, Gideon tried his hand...



He was just about to imagine rolling out some flaky pastry, prior to creating some sausage rolls, when an alarm sounded, and the ship lurched...

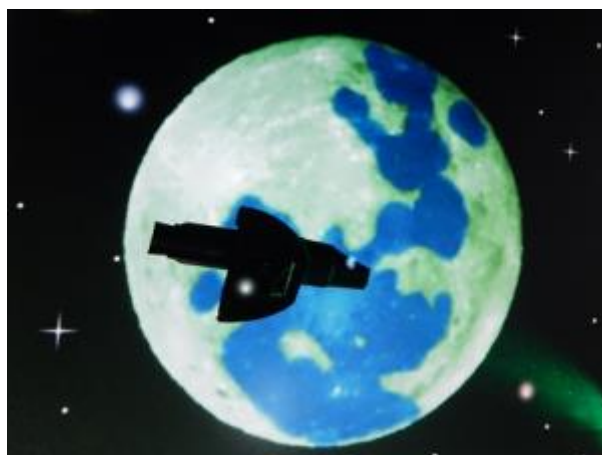


It then burst into a pocket of normal space that had been hidden by the surrounding nebula...

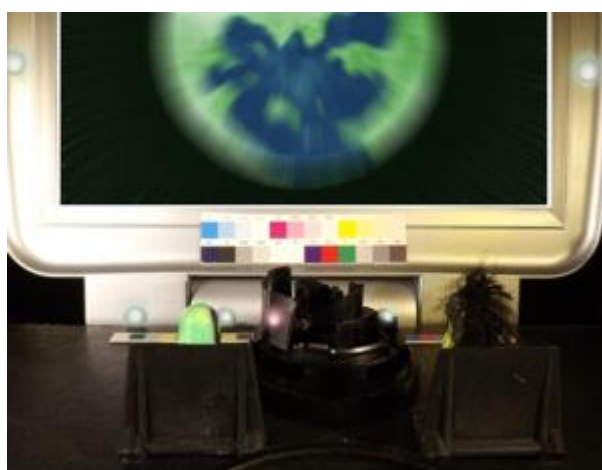


"Look." Gideon cried out from within the grasp of the Psycho-Chef. "Worlds. Two of them. And they're on a collision course!"

"I am getting some anomalous readings from the larger world." The Oracle announced.

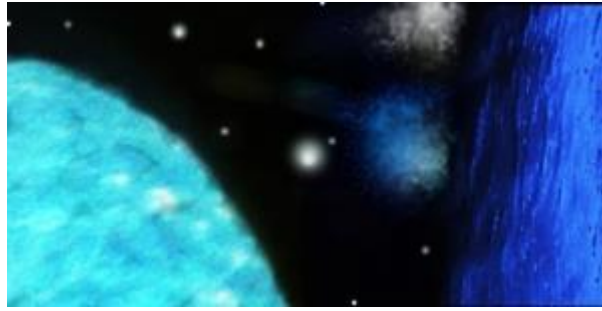


"Let me look at them." Flaxwell said urgently. Then having done so, he added: "The Porthole of Everywhere is said to give off a unique radiation frequency. I don't know what that frequency is; but I'm getting a really weird one from the planet below. We can't risk losing it now: we're so close. We have to go down for a closer look...."



"But the planet is clearly becoming unstable." Gideon observed. "Tidal forces are tearing the tectonic plates apart. Hell will soon be unleashed down there. But you're right, of course: we didn't come all this way - just to be thwarted by the end of the world!"

So, as the two worlds came ever closer together...



...the Scroton Five dived into the atmosphere and levelled off just above the planet's surface, where Flaxwell and Gideon witnessed a huge energy discharge...

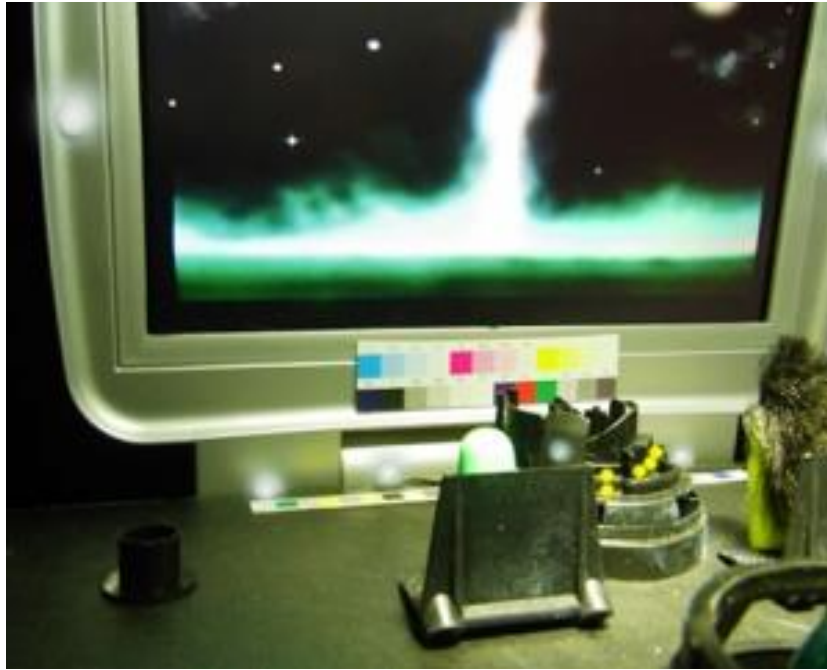


"The two planet's magnetospheres are interacting in a most destructive fashion." The Oracle informed them. "The resulting concussive shock wave...



...might sweep clean around the planet - destroying everything in its path and leaving it a wasteland."

"What, you mean like that." Flaxwell inquired.



"Indeed I do." The Oracle replied. "I would suggest you gain considerable altitude, before it's too late."

Flaxwell didn't need further bidding. A moment later...



"Flipping heck, Flaxwell!" Gideon exclaimed. "Everything is aflame. I pray that the Porthole of Everywhere isn't included in the conflagration."

"Yeah, me too." Flaxwell grunted as he struggled to keep the bucking craft aloft and under his control. He then added: "Oh cripes - even the fires are on fire..."



...I think the planet is breaking up. Gravity waves are causing merry hell with my instruments. I'm gonna go as fast as I can, then pull her up in a vertical climb. It's the only way to get outta here!"

So he did...



"Wow, Flaxwell." Gideon said admiringly. "You sure can fly fast and low. You should have been a fighter-bomber pilot. When will we begin to climb?"

At that moment the forward scanners detected an object straight ahead.

"Is it the Porthole of Everywhere?" Gideon asked excitedly. He found out a second later...



"Aargh." He yelled incoherently. Then he added: "It's a newly-formed volcano. Swerve, Flaxwell: swerve!"

So Flaxwell swerved...



But although he'd avoided a collision, the Scroton Five still had insufficient forward velocity to attempt a steep climb into space. Naturally - being a mere professor - Gideon rushed to the lavatory...



And it was this act that saved the ship and its occupants. As advertised, the lavatory removed Gideon's waste products and converted them into energy for the ship's

engines. The resulting minuscule increase in speed was enough to allow Flaxwell to begin his climb...



"Unless something truly cataclysmic happens now," Flaxwell called from the pilot's seat, "I think we're gonna make it." And, for a moment, his optimism appeared to be well founded. "Look at the screen, Giddy." He shouted.

Gideon rushed back to his seat - just in time to see the latest read-outs...

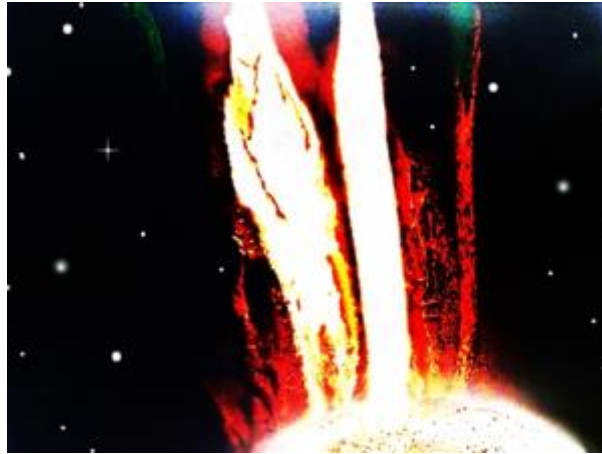


"It's hot." He bellowed above the screaming of tortured, super-heated air as it tore at the hull of the Scroton Five. "But it's not blowing up!"

Then the northern hemisphere heaved, expanded, and became misshapen...



...and duly vomited the contents of the planet's core into space...

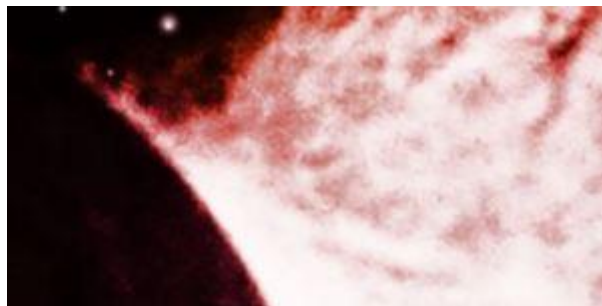


Those aboard the Scroton Five held their breath. Well two of them did. The Oracle interrupted a couple of algorithms instead...



"More volcanos." Gideon cried out. "The size of continents. Surely the planet can't hold together much longer."

All across the surviving surface of the doomed world, flames carried high into the upper atmosphere and burned the vacuum of space...



"It's lucky were not down there anymore." Gideon opined. "I much prefer getting the heck out of here at maximum thrust."

Freed of immediate danger, Flaxwell could relax enough to become curious. "Oracle." He said with unusual authority, "Show me the smaller planet."

Naturally the Oracle did as it was bid, and duly swung the scanner around to reveal...



"By the Saint of All Earplugs." Gideon exclaimed. "It looks like my rear end feels after a Saturday night vindaloo and chips!"

"Collision is only moments away." The Oracle warned Flaxwell. "No dilly-dallying: we have no idea how vast the resulting explosion will be."

"No worries." Flaxwell assured the genius device. "It's only two worlds colliding. At our current speed we can easily outrun the debris. It would take a nova to worry this little baby."

The Oracle's eyes snapped around to regard the foolishly nonchalant earplug...



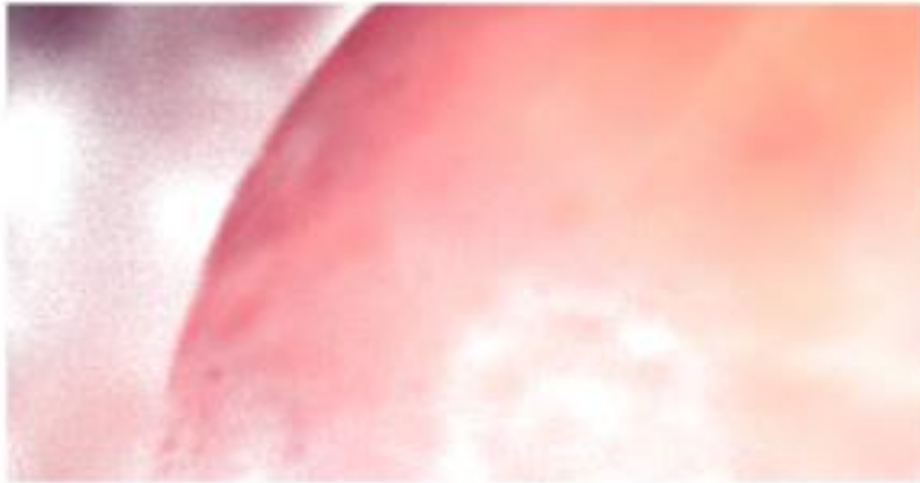
"What if I were to tell you that the small world is composed of anti-matter?" It said.

Flaxwell continued to behave in a foolishly nonchalant earplug manner. "I would probably poop in my pants." He jested.

"Flaxwell." Gideon croaked nervously through a constricting throat. "I think what Oracle is trying to tell you is..."

But he never finished his line - because Flaxwell interrupted him with a horrified scream: "The smaller planet *is* composed of anti-matter! Next time, Oracle, speak with a little more urgency, huh? Aaargh!"

It was at the same moment that Flaxwell tried to engage the hyper-drive that the worlds fell into a fatal embrace...



In a single moment matter and anti-matter were annihilated...



"Quick, Giddy." Flaxwell yelled above the noise of the straining engines. "Get yourself into that toilet: we need extra power: and we need it now!"

"But I've already been." Gideon wailed. "I'm completely empty!"

"Opening Gravity Lock...now." The Oracle said calmly...



With lightning reactions, Flaxwell hurled the Scroton Five into the Neutron Star's wormhole...



But before the Gravity Lock could close, the explosion's incandescent debris followed the ship in...



"What?" Flaxwell said tetchily. "Don't these matter/anti-matter explosions ever give up?"



"Oh, I don't know." Gideon offered. "Maybe I could squeeze out a little more. These are desperate times after all."

But, as luck would have it, he didn't need to, because the sheer volume of the pursuing debris collapsed the wormhole - spilling flame and fire all about - and releasing the Scroton Five into open space...



"If you don't mind, Giddy." Flaxwell said, as he climbed from the pilot's seat, "I'd like to use the toilet first. I'm feeling a little fragile right now."

Several minutes passed, after Flaxwell had disappeared into the toilet, and Gideon was becoming concerned that he had fallen down it and become converted into energy for the engines. But, eventually he returned to the pilot's seat...

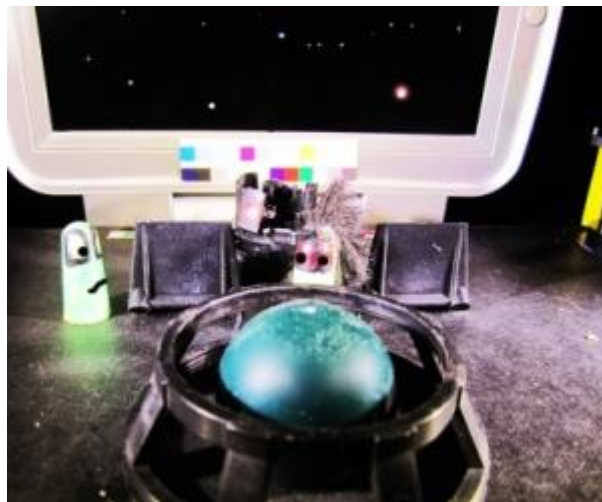


"I don't want to talk about it." Flaxwell said quietly. "But let's just say that I've never been so frightened in all my life."

Gideon, although young, could be wise: he decided to change the subject:

"I don't know about you, but all that excitement has done nothing to assuage my pangs of hunger. If anything, I'm even more starving than I was before."

Flaxwell must have been harbouring similar thoughts, because he leapt from his seat and ran around to the Oracle...



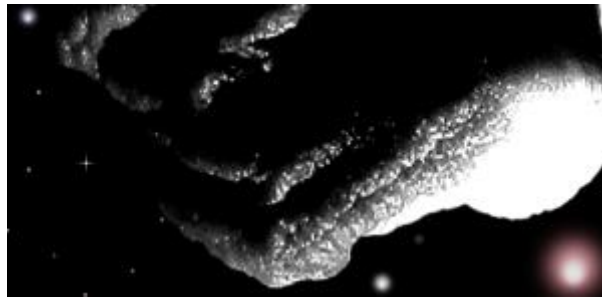
"Oracle. Oracle." He wailed. "If we don't find food soon, you'll be commanding a ghost ship!"

"Well, actually," The Oracle replied without hesitation, "While you've been attending to your ablutions, I've been scanning nearby space. And, you'll be happy to hear, I have something positive to report. May I take the helm for a couple of minutes?"

If it meant food, Flaxwell was happy for the Oracle to take the helm for a couple of eons.

"Yo." He roared with joy. "Go for it!"

Two minutes later a huge asteroid hove into view...



It was so huge that Flaxwell and Gideon retook their seats to witness a circumnavigation of it...



"I love rocks." Gideon said, somewhat unexpectedly. He then made his true feelings plain when he added, sarcastically: "I could chew on them all day long."

Then he was out of his seat - his anger rising and his spittle spraying...

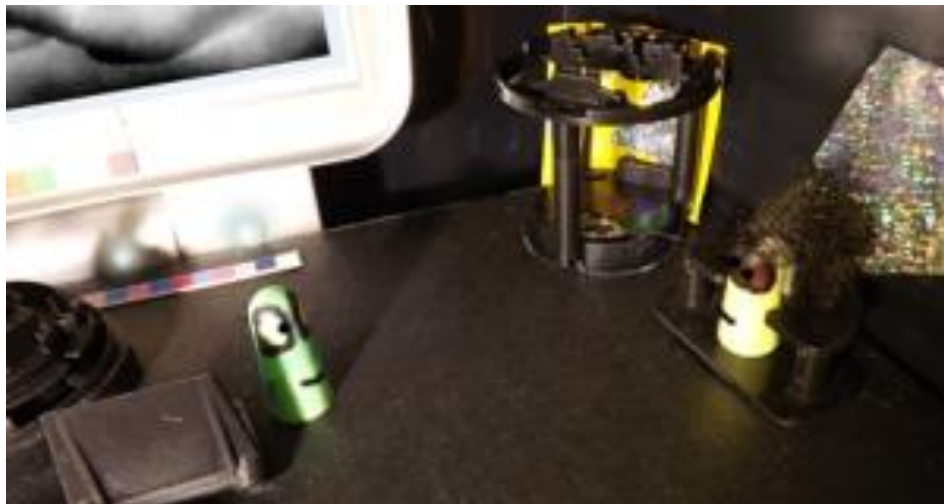


In fact he was so angry that he blew off with rage - which startled Flaxwell more than he cared to admit.

"I don't care about asteroids." He yelled. "I hate them, in fact. They're always threatening to fall into planets and causing extinction events. I've seen all the movies. I know about these things!"

"But - but." A confused Oracle tried to respond. "But it's not just this asteroid. This is only the outermost one of a vast field..."

But neither earplug was listening: they'd gone to the Psycho-Chef...



"Come on, Flaxwell." Gideon urged. "Try to imagine some cornflakes."

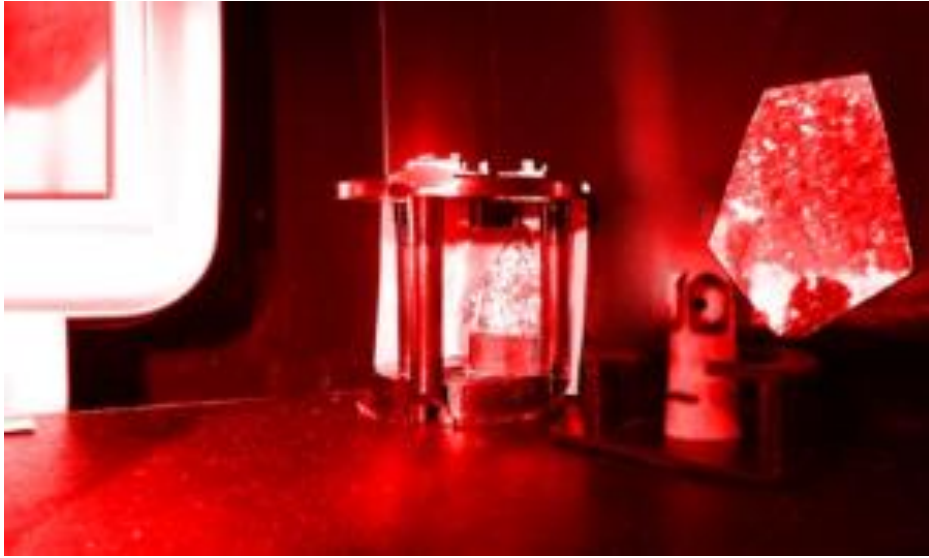
"Corn flakes?" Flaxwell queried. "But I don't have a clue how cornflakes are cooked. It's usually done in huge food factories, isn't it?"

Gideon pondered the problem for a moment. Then: "I never thought of that. Try a boiled egg."

Flaxwell did - to the best of his ability. But, after rushing to the galley to fetch the steaming orb, Gideon found the receptacle empty....



So he rushed back to try himself. In fact he rushed back so urgently that the ship went to crimson alert...



And it remained at crimson alert all through his wild imagining...

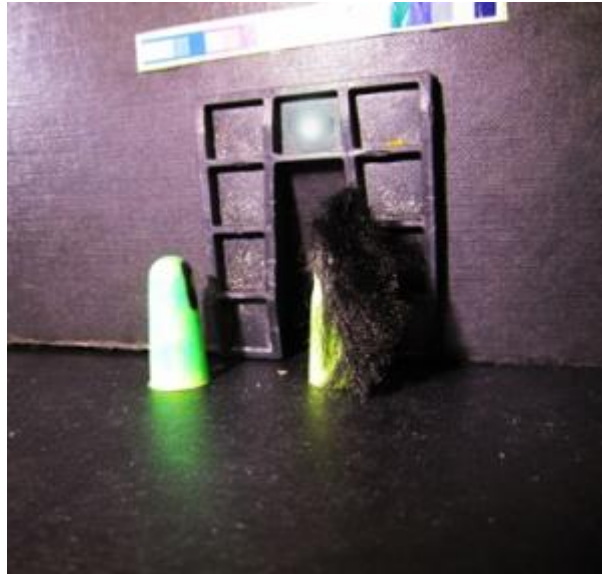


"What are you imagining cooking, Giddy?" Flaxwell asked.

"Shut up." Gideon snapped. "I'm concentrating. And turn off that bloody crimson alert: I can't think straight."

"Neither of you is thinking straight." The Oracle tried to interrupt. "If only you would listen to me..."

But before it could finish its line, the two earplugs had dashed to the exit...



Gideon paused at the threshold. "I can't bear to look." He said. "You go in."

So it was left to Flaxwell to face disappointment...



"Bum!" He bellowed at the sight of an empty receptacle. Then calming slightly, he added: "Talking of bums..."



"Quick, Giddy." He said. "Find the Oracle's bum: I'm gonna kick him right up it."

But, of course, the servo-mechanism possessed no rear end to speak of, and so the vaguely disappointed duo went back to their fruitless task...



With a false smile, Gideon said: "You can do it this time, Flaxy. I know it. Think of frozen peas. I like peas. My dad was a pea farmer - miles away from the Museum of Future Technology. He used to make pea flavoured coffee, which they used to sell at the museum's Cafe Puke!"

But when, once again, they raced into the galley, disappointment would torment them horribly...



Returning to the control room, Flaxwell whispered to the Oracle...



"I just thought you ought to know: I hate you. I hate this ship. I wish I'd never liberated it. I want my dinner."

Then he noticed Gideon giving him a furtive sidelong glance. In an instant he read his colleague's mind. "The coffee machine!" He bellowed manically.

It was a foot race, and both competitors were evenly matched...



They stared at each other over the coffee machine - their stomach's rumbling.

"I dare you to make the first move." Flaxwell ground out - as if he had a mouth full of coffee beans. "I bet you go for crappachino."

"What - and have you jump me whilst my back is turned?" Gideon growled back. "Not a chance, sucker."

It was a stand-off - broken very easily and quickly when the Oracle said: "I have access to food. Listen to me, you dolts. You silicon wallies. You blisteringly turd-like life forms."

It then explained that its short-range telescope had detected a Space Slug...



"A Space Slug?" Gideon complained with a whine in his voice. "I don't eat slugs. What are they - molluscs or something?"

"Shut up and let the Oracle talk." Flaxwell - his common sense restored - snapped at Gideon.

"Space Slugs are scavengers." The Oracle continued. "They clean up waste products and left-overs from the garbage holds of space ships and other space-born stuff."

"Left-overs?" Gideon interrupted again. "Waste products?"

Flaxwell said nothing: he simply slapped Gideon around both cheeks.

"Thank you, Flaxwell." The Oracle said.

"Yes, thank you, Flaxwell." Gideon also mumbled.

"Space Slugs," the Oracle continued a second time, "also hang around space that is being worked. Space full of asteroids. Asteroids that are worked by Asteroid Miners. There's one on screen now. Look."



It then added: "Would you like me to hail them for you?"

"Do they have egg mayonnaise sandwiches?" Gideon inquired.

"Probably not." The reply came.

Naturally Gideon was disappointed. His shoulders slumped. But he said: "Okay. Well hail them anyway."

A few minutes later, and after hearing the sad tale of the hungry earplugs, the Asteroid Mining Company's Shift Manager appeared on-screen...



"Get yourselves down to our Moon-Dome home." It said through a pair of unfeasibly pursed lips. "We have plenty of off-cut raw materials that are not worth us processing. You can take as much as you can carry."

"Raw materials?" Flaxwell queried of the Oracle when the Shift Manager had signed-off.

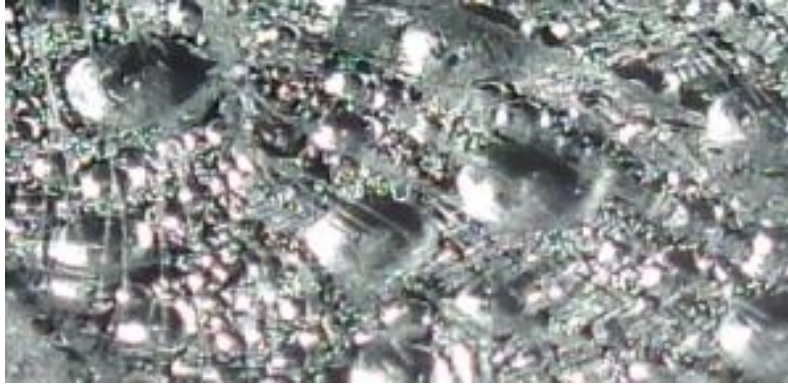
"Off-cuts?" Gideon added.

"I've discovered something very significant." The Oracle replied. "The problem with the Psycho-Chef doesn't lie in your inability to cook mentally. The problem resides within the galley. Because this ship was not intended to embark upon a lengthy mission, the victualling company did not fill the biological raw material tank with the stuff that the Psycho-Chef requires to create its meals. In short - we are running on empty.

It had not occurred to either Earplug to question where the meals they visualised would actually come from. They just took it for granted. But now that they understood, they realised what their next move should be. A short while later the Scroton Five had landed - somewhat awkwardly and resembling a beached whale...



...next to the Asteroid Miners Moon-Dome home. Or Moon-Dome *Town*, as it transpired...



...inside which Flaxwell and Gideon were given free access to the spoil pit...



Neither of them was terribly impressed; and Gideon wondered why he'd gone to the bother of wearing his best hat.

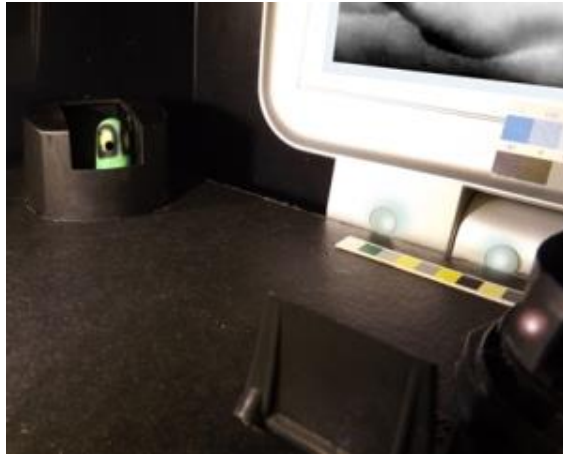
"These mouldering biological remains are what are left of a food cache deposited here, thousands of years ago, by a space-wandering race of beings that have long-since departed our galaxy for places unknown?" Gideon said in a tone that suggested that he didn't truly believe what he was saying.

"Yes." Flaxwell replied. "And the Asteroid Miners dig it out; process it into something edible; and sell it to planets that have food shortages."

"Do you think they could process a few lumps into something edible for us?" Gideon suggested. "I'm not sure I really want to touch this stuff with my bare hands. Especially these lumps of something icky that glows."

"No." Flaxwell answered him. "That's what we have the Psycho-Chef for. Now fill your pockets: believe me - it'll be delicious."

Well an hour later, and after having enjoyed baked beans on toast by the bucket full, Gideon had to agree that it had tasted "Lovely." But a short while after tossing his plate into the dishwasher, he was called for other duties...



Unfortunately the 'beans' had been of the more vitriolic kind. And even before Gideon had finished, the energy-converter had cried, "Enough!" and given a visual warning on-screen."



"Oh, by the Saint of All Earplugs." Flaxwell wailed in horror. "The brochure was wrong: it *does* smell!"

So it was with heavy hearts, and even heavier stomachs, that they turned the ship about and headed once more for the brilliant light of the Balsac Nebula...



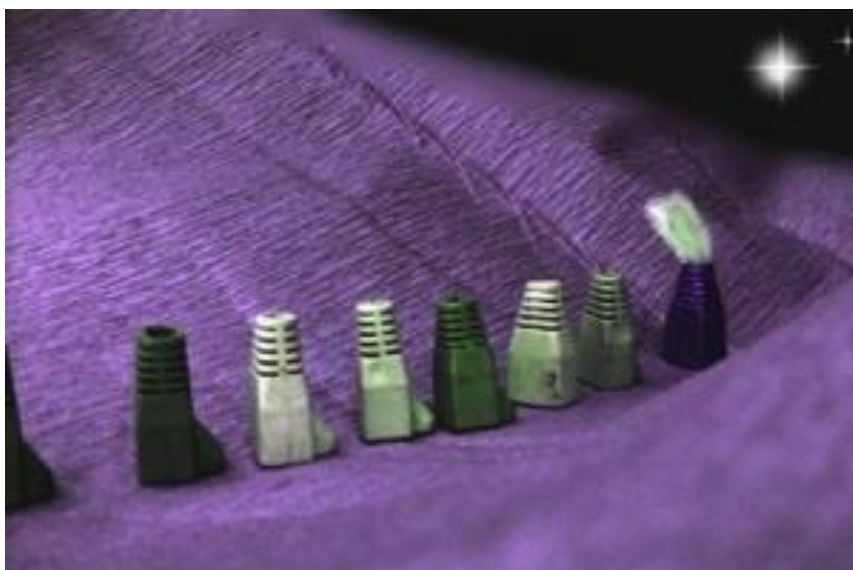
Flaxwell assumed the helm...



...and, following a brief burst of maximum thrust, the Scroton Five found itself, once more in the strange realm of stellar dust and limitless energies...



Meanwhile, upon the planet Scroton, its religious leaders were holding mountainside vigils for the safe return of the stolen vessel...



And Johnny Nosebleed exercised his tonsils as a lounge singer...



But not all activity upon the distant planet was so passive. The security team had not wasted a second of their lives in maudlin retrospection of their previous errors...

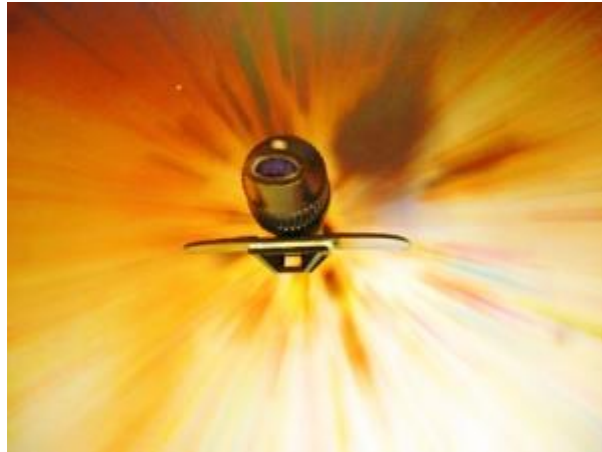


They even had the coffee vending machine replaced with a superior brand.

"Gotta say," the Security Manager...er...said. "This Cafe Yuk really is the real deal. And, you know, I don't pee half as many times as I did with the old stuff. I can tell you - I was a right old piddle-machine, and make no mistake about it. Right then; to work; what gives?"

The Charge Hand didn't dare take his eyes from his read-out lest he miss something vital. "You know that Scroton Five that initiated a Gravity Lock, in the hope of following the stolen ship?"

The Security Manager cast his mind back...



"Oh, yeah." He said at length. "What about it?"

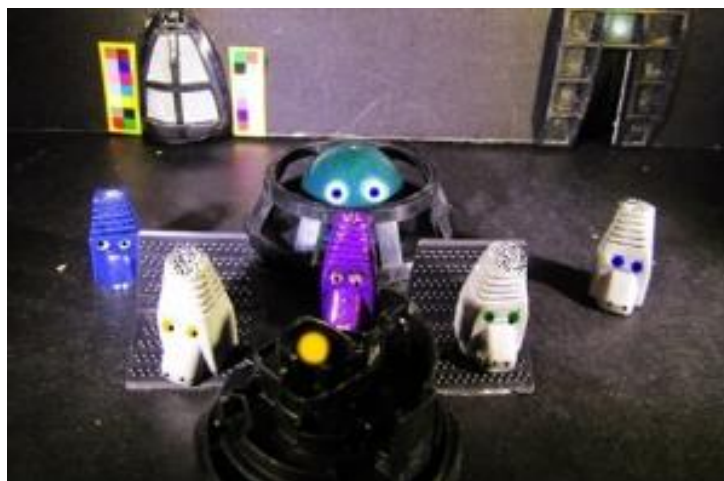
"Well they emerged in an unfamiliar place."



"Great." The Security Manager responded positively. "Anything since then?"

"No." The Charge Hand answered. "We're still waiting for news."

Meanwhile, the aforementioned Scroton Five's crew were hard at work...



...pursuing avenues of investigation. From left to right, they were Ship's Cook - Urchie Kakkapo: Pilot - Nobbington Sprake: Ship's Oracle: Captain - Werner Hissenfrapp: First Officer - Selma Ferkins: and Midshipman - Willum Poobs.

So far they had enjoyed their first pursuit mission together, and hoped it would last a lot longer...



"Look at that." Captain Werner Hissenfrapp gushed, shortly after having emerged, safe and sound from the Gravity Lock. "Doesn't it make your heart sing?"

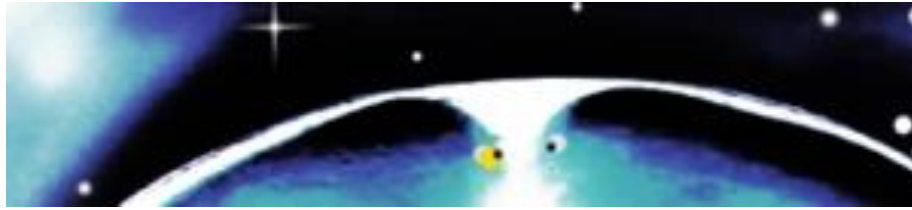
"It certainly do - don't it?" Urchie Kakkapo responded. "A bit like that breakfast I knocked up this morning."

"No, Urchie," Selma Ferkins responded. "You breakfasts make our hearts sink. Now, can anyone figure where that dratted ship has disappeared to?"

"I have an ion trail that passes quite close to that mysterious disc in space. It might be our fugitives." Nobbington Sprake suggested from the pilot's chair. "Wanna go look?"



Little did the crew know, but they had been spotted by a couple of God Nymphs...



...whose job it was to go about the galaxy looking for interesting things to do for the Creators of the life forms that inhabited it.

"Ooh, that looks interesting." One said to the other as they lay, squished up, inside their tiny dome.

"One ship chasing an identical one." The other replied. "And I've not seen either type before. The second one is manned by Ethernet Cable Ends."

"Ethernet Cable Ends?" The other exclaimed. "Aren't they the last species to be granted sentience and self-awareness? They get special dispensation. We'd better tell someone!"

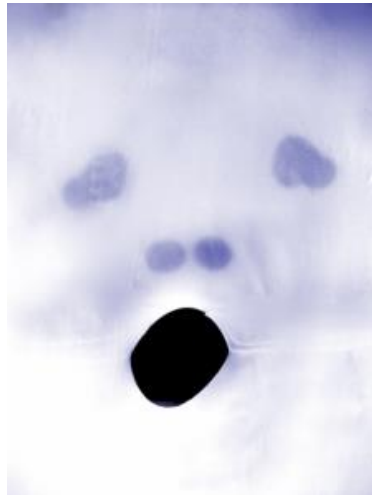
So they informed the Celestial God of Nebulae...



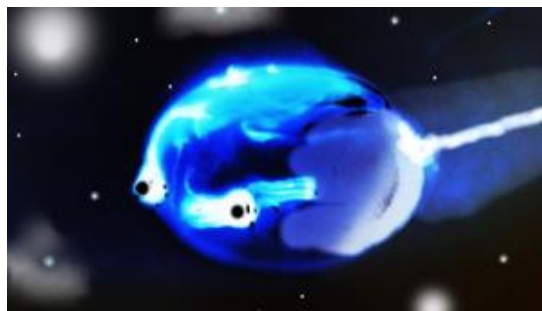
Who, in turn passed it down to the God of Cosmic Gas Clouds...



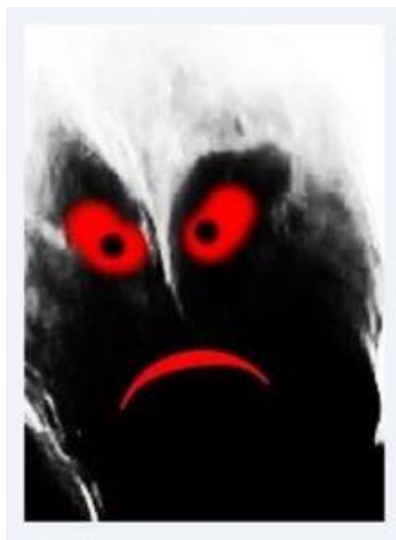
...who thought it more appropriate to be taken care of by the God of Singularities and Black Holes...



...who was a bit busy at the time - devouring the centre of a galaxy that had been long-earmarked for destruction - so moved the problem to Spollox...



...a junior God, who was globular in shape and mind, and spent its time swinging back and forth across the universe on a length of cosmic string. It, in turn, considered that any problem that lay upon the opposite end of the galaxy, and could not be attended to within the next millennia, not worth its attention. So the case was moved over to the Sub-God - Dick...



Who was always grumpy and lazy and thought ill of everyone and everything.

"Lousy Ethernet Cable Ends." He moaned. "Don't know what all the fuss is about. I prefer those pesky little End Caps."



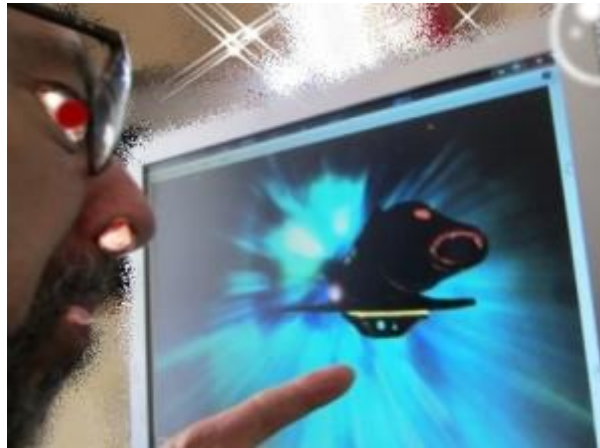
"Now them, I almost like. Hey, Maurizio, can you take this?"

The Maurizio to which Dick referred was The Supreme Being's favourite Space Dinosaur - Maurizio Fabbaruni...



And, naturally, Maurizio was happy to take anything interesting to his grouchy boss. It was what Space Dinosaurs had been born to do.

The Supreme Being, being The Supreme Being, didn't really need to be told about the pursuit of the Scroton Five by another Scroton Five. But he was so busy looking at another Scroton Five...



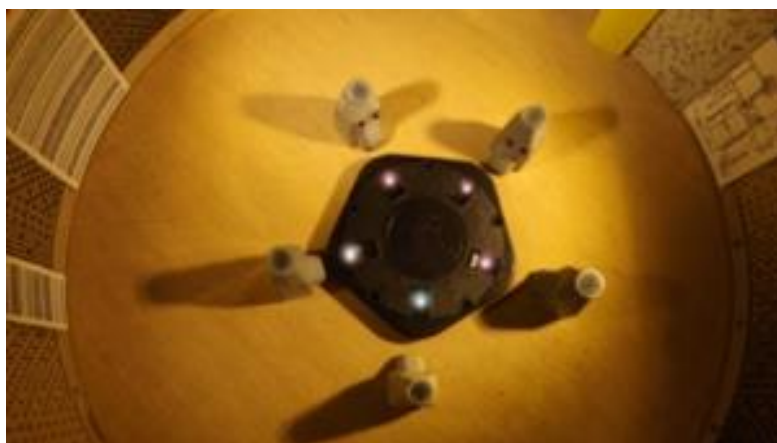
...that he hadn't given the other two much of his attention.

"Thank you, Maurizio." He said. "These bloody Scroton Fives are ten a penny at the moment. What the heck is this one up to?"

"Do you wanna me to finda the out, Boss?" Maurizio asked in his execrable God-speak.

"Yes. Have all pertinent info patched through to me here. I'm feeling a little gaseous this morning, and I don't want to dissipate."

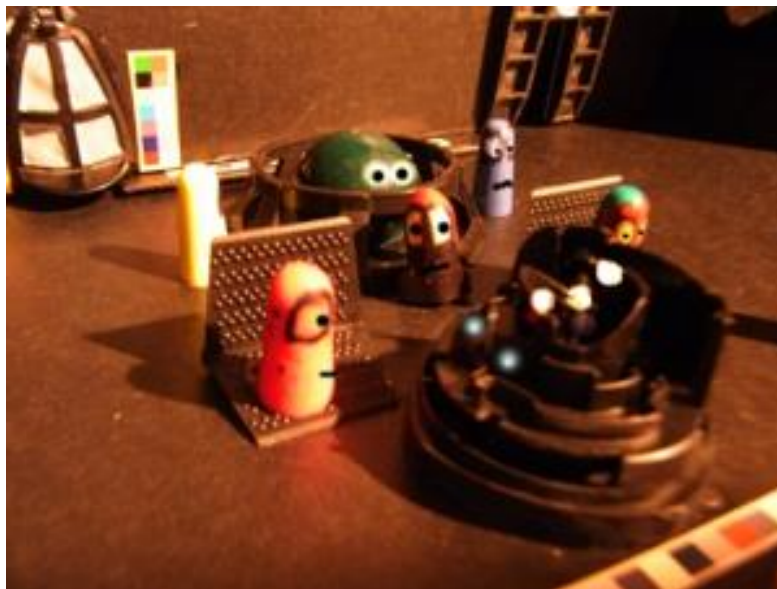
In no time at all - because linear time does not exist outside of the physical universe - the required information became digested knowledge. The security team that worked from the listening station in Weird Space...



...had decided that a little competition between security teams would make them more efficient and successful. So, without access to a fully-trained crew for a spare Scroton Five, they elected to hire some earplug mercenaries - to whom they handed over the ignition keys of the latest ship off the production line...



With the guidance of the ship's Oracle, it hadn't taken long for the mercenary crew to master the complexities of the control room...



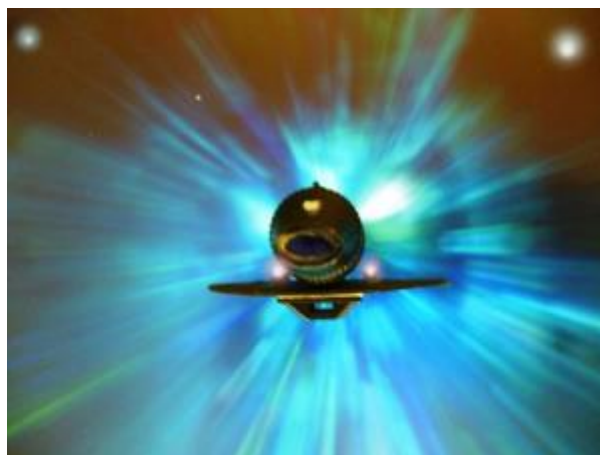
The merciless Gloria Simpleton took the captain's role, just forward of the Oracle. To her right, the vicious Zugtander Frootkins kept the helm under control. To Gloria's left, and acting as her First Officer sat the vile-smelling Ole-Hebble Stangenklopp. Behind her stood her trusted aid, Moritz Trumpetinger, who always watched her back, and punched anyone who looked at her 'funny'. There were also a couple of nameless slave-cooks who seldom left the galley, despite the presence of the Psycho-Chef. Together they were a mean bunch of hombres, who had no intention of giving back the craft when they had completed their task and taken the reward money - along with some hostages. They had once been *bona fide* pirates - robbing, stealing, and doing other stuff in a Hyper-Space Attack Craft that they had stolen from a group of End Cap Pirates who had stopped off at a quiet planet for a quick pee behind a bush...



Now they lived in an abandoned space station...



...in which they would eat with their hands; belch loudly at every opportunity; leave the seat up when they went for a pee; and hold farting competitions whenever they damned well wanted too. And now some lame-brain Cable Ends had given them the best ship in the galaxy...



...and trusted them with it, because they'd *'signed a contract'*. Duh!

But Gloria Simpleton and her crew weren't stupid. And, in their way, they were sort of honest. They'd been hired to find the stolen ship: and find the stolen ship they would. To that end they'd demanded access to the Closed Circuit Television recording for the day prior to the theft. So they had a pretty good idea who was aboard the display model Scroton Five...



Especially when they reviewed the night footage...



"The hair and the hat." Gloria said. "There's nothing like being conspicuous."

"Any earplug is conspicuous on Scroton." Pilot, Zugtander reminded her.

Gloria considered this an accurate and timely statement. "Moritz." She said. "Punch him in the nose for being a smarty pants."

Whilst Zugtander reeled from the hammer blow to his hooter, Gloria turned to Ole-Hebble. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"I smell?" Ole-Hebble chanced.

"Well yes." Gloria replied. "But I was thinking about places where these two bozos might have fled."

Ole-Hebble shrugged his shoulders. So Zugtander dared speak again: "They're after the Porthole of Everywhere. People have been looking for that merchandise for longer than I can remember. Ergo - if I may be so bold as to use that word - it won't be found in known space. Gotta be somewhere else."

"Unknown space!" A suddenly inspired Ole-Hebble yelled loudly.

Too loudly. Gloria winced. "Moritz." She said.

Whilst Ole-Hebble had his go at reeling from a hammer blow, Zugtander continued:

"It'll probably be on an uncharted planet within a nebula. A big one, I'd say. I've been reading a report about a Cable End ship that followed the stolen ship into something called a Gravity Lock. Extrapolating from there, I'd figure our best bet would be the Great Balsac. Of course we could drop off at a couple of minor planets on the way, just to be certain we haven't missed them hiding up somewhere. But if I was a betting earplug, I'd bet on the Balsac."

"Ole." Gloria said to her First Officer as he clambered back into his seat. "Now you see why I don't have Moritz throw him out of the airlock."

So they stopped off at a couple of obscure planets - one of which was extremely blue and highly unsuitable for earplugs because the only land mass was single archipelago of tiny islands...



"Scratch that." Gloria said whilst the ship was still in orbit. "On to the next one."

And the next planet was even more inhospitable...



"The planet is still in its molten stage." Gloria observed.

"Yeah - real hot." Ole-Hebble opined. "Wouldn't wanna go down there."

Gloria drew in a long breath. She really hadn't wanted to spend much time on the job. Ideally she would have liked to have captured two nervous earplugs who were clearly out of their depth; had them killed: stolen their ship; and all before tea time.

"Grrr." She growled to herself. "I need to test the weaponry. I need to destroy something."

The opportunity for Gloria to vent her spleen, in the best way she knew, came when Zugtander had suggested a little-known back-way through hyperspace. It wasn't cheerful and blue: and it was often the haunt of interstellar nere-do-wells; but it was quick, and would probably get them to the Great Balsac Nebula before the Cable Endcrewed Scroton Five arrived. So, a short while after engaging the hyper-drive, the forward scanner detected something in the stream ahead...



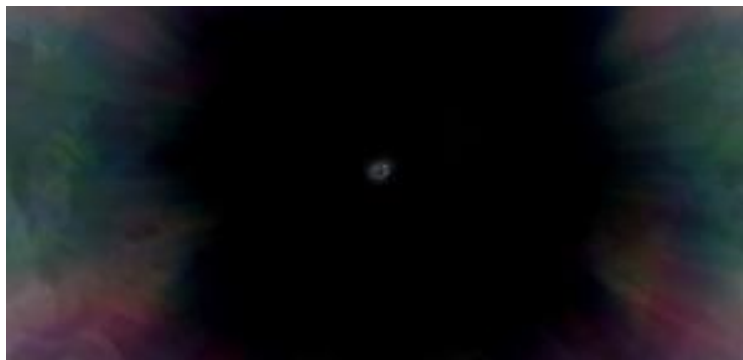
It was some distance off, but Gloria elected to go to Crimson Alert...



...which brought forth the slave-cooks from the galley.

"Hey," one of them said. "We gonna kick some butt?"

Moritz, usually so calm and collected, was surprised when the object became visible...



"Isn't that...?" he began.

But he said no more because the sensors chose that moment to make their report...



"Hey." Ole-Hebble cheered up. "Looks like End Caps!"

"Doesn't it just." Gloria snarled. "Zugtander: test the weapons."

A split second later...



Whether Gloria intended an explosion so powerful that it snapped the hyper-space stream, no one will ever know...



But it did, and with her crew cheering like morons beside her, the mercenary Scroton Five burst through the remnants of the Pirate Vessel, and returned to normal space...



"Now that is what I call a good day's work." Gloria yelled as her crew lined up to shake her hand.

But if she had known whose eyes had witnessed her deplorable act, she wouldn't have been so darned sure of herself. In fact she would have wet her knickers...

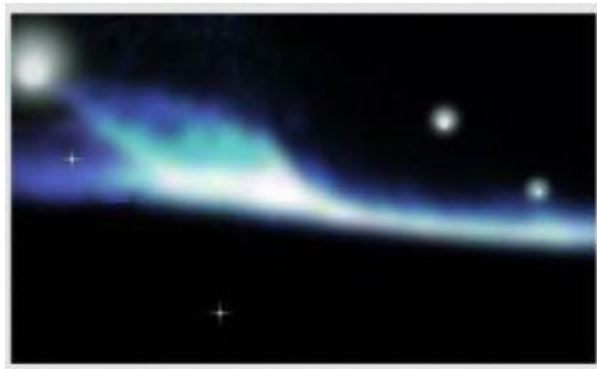


"Rotten lousy gits." The Supreme Being snapped. "I'll teach them to act so fast and loose with my life-forms!"

With that he had the God of Singularities and Black Holes form a singularity right beside the mercenaries...



"Aaargh." They managed, before their ship was drawn into the event horizon, and deposited promptly at the very edge of the galaxy...



...in the Graveyard of Space...



Chapter 3

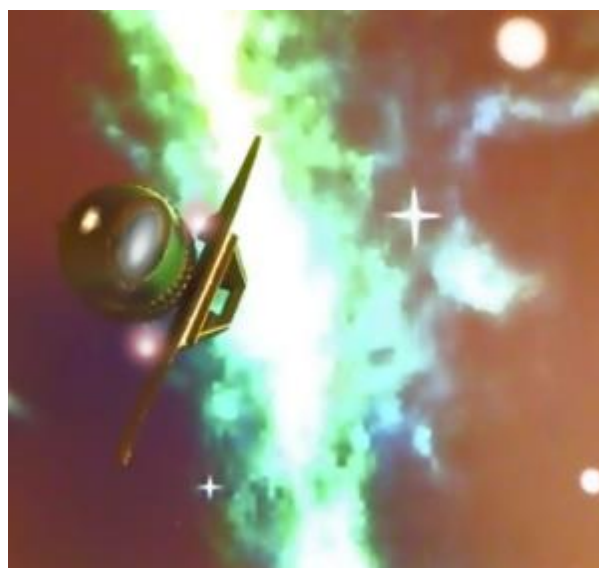
Of course, the crew of the Cable End Scroton Five knew nothing of the events that had led to the destruction of the pirate crew and the loss, for all time, of the mercenary Scroton Five. In fact Selma Ferkins was concentrating on her job as First Officer so hard that she didn't have time to notice anything else...



Captain Werner Hissenfrapp wasn't much better. His feet ached, and he wondered why a ship's commander didn't have a chair of his own.

Willum Poobs, the young midshipman, wasn't taking that much interest either: he was wearing non-regulation earphones. His attention was more on not allowing his body to move to the insistent bass line of the disco music he was listening to.

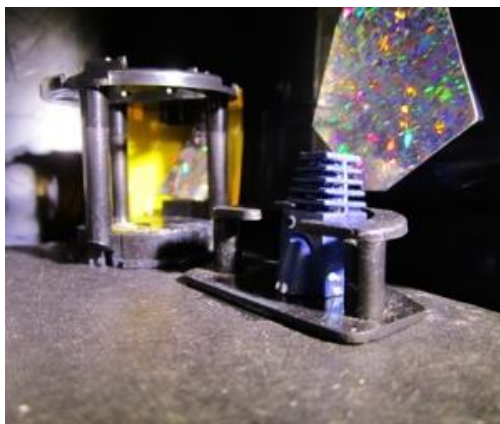
Fortunately Nobbington Sprake took his job seriously, and was piloting competently, though without verve and élan...



This was because it was nearing dinner time, and his stomach was telling him as much...



Taking his eyes from the helm, he threw a glance in the direction of Urchie Kakkapo...



Urchie noticed this. But because he was an excellent cook, he could multi-task without breaking a sweat. So he was able to say: "Yeah, it's okay, Nobbington: I'm imagining rice pudding - with strawberry jam."

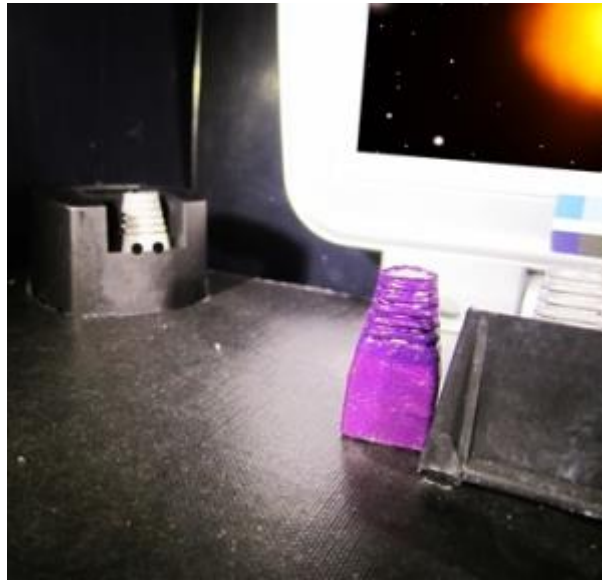
With news like that, the young pilot was out of his chair like a scalded plugmutt.

"Captain." He shouted as he made for the exit, "you have the con."

Werner continued to sit in the pilot's chair for almost a half hour after the pilot's departure. He didn't complain though: at least it meant he was sitting down and able to get the weight off his sore feet. He was almost disappointed when the crew returned...



Shortly after Selma Ferkins had resumed her duty station, she became aware of the Captain standing beside her...



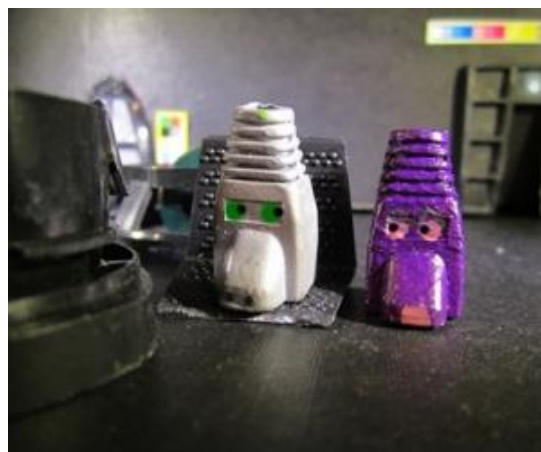
"There have been reports of a vast explosion inside the Balsac Nebula." She informed him.

Werner wanted clarification. "The *Great* Balsac Nebula?" He inquired.

Selma made an inquiry of her own: "Is there another Balsac Nebula?"

"Not that I'm aware of, Number One." Werner replied.

"Then, yes, Sir: in the *Great* Balsac Nebula." Selma answered. "Are you thinking we might investigate?"



"The trail has gone cold, Number One. We can't go slinking back to Weird Space with our metaphorical tails between our metaphysical legs, now can we? But first...has anyone tested the toilet yet?"

"Yes." Selma reported. "Willum was in there when you sidled up next to me."

"How did it go?"

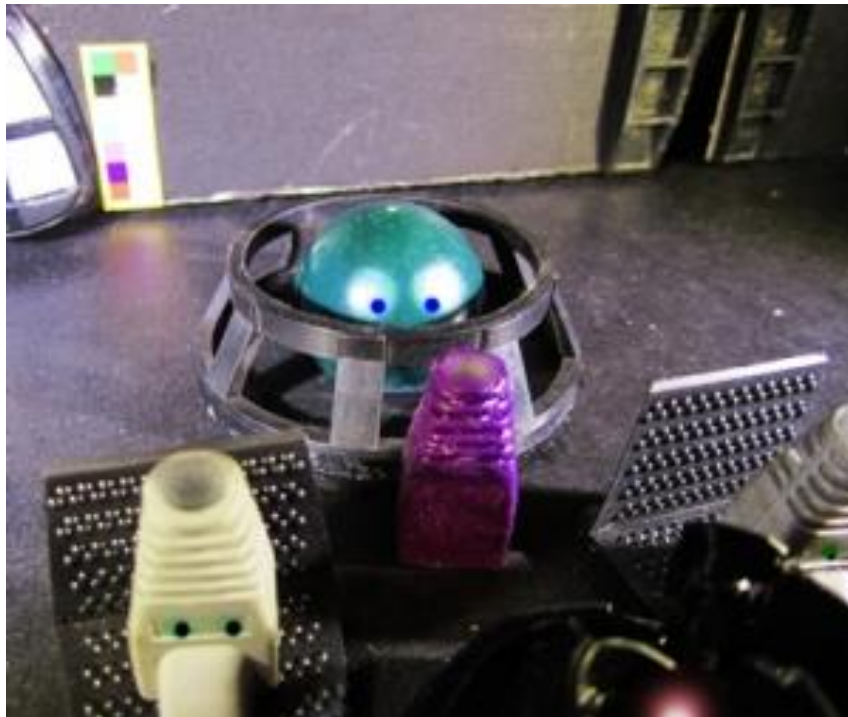
"I don't know: I haven't asked. But I detect no aroma; so I guess the sales brochures are not telling fibs, Sir."

"Walk with me, Number One: I need to do a Number Twos. You and Willum can talk me through the procedure..."

So they did...



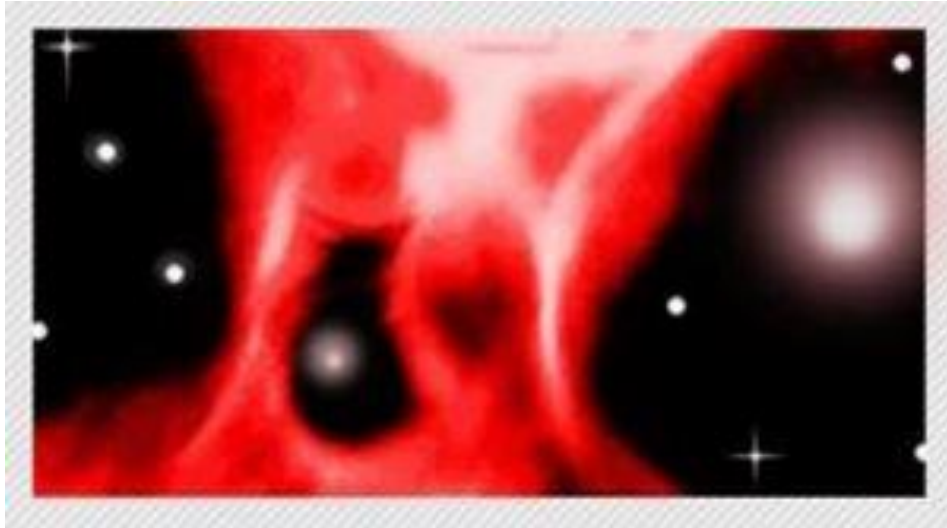
And it was very successful...



"Engine performance just jumped by eighteen per cent." Nobbington reported.

"Captain," the ship's Oracle interrupted. "Look at these pictures of the explosion near the Great Balsac Nebula. It has just arrived from an observatory, where they were studying it."

Werner took the offered picture in his hand and ran inexperienced eyes over it...



"Big bang." He observed. "Glad I wasn't there."

"Maybe *you* weren't." The Oracle replied. "But someone was. Check out the main viewer: I've put up a closer shot for you to see."

Werner turned to regard the huge screen...



"I see." Werner said breathlessly. "It appears to be a vessel fleeing an expanding ball of incandescent flame. Akin to a nova, if I'm not mistaken."

"Akin, Sir." Selma piped up. "But that is a stellar nursery. There can be no ageing stars in a nebula."

"Then what is that vast explosion?" Willum Poobs asked in his desperately young voice.

The answer came from an unexpected source: "A matter/anti-matter explosion." Urchie Kakkapo suggested. He then explained: "I once witnessed one - when I was a young midshipman, much like Willum, here. It forever scarred my psyche. That is why I became a simple cook who makes few demands of life. That way I get to fry things, instead of things frying me!"

"You have experienced something that none of us have, Mister Kakkapo." Werner said sagely. "You are invited to join the discussion."

So he did, and they listened to everything he had to say...



Then they decided that, in all probability, the unidentified ship in the observatory picture was the missing Scroton Five.

"But could it have escaped that conflagration?" Werner asked no one in particular.

"They could if they had time to open a Gravity Lock." Nobbington called over his shoulder.

"But that would have carried them far from here." Selma argued. "There can be little point in visiting the Great Balsac Nebula, if our quarry has already departed."

"They'll be back." Urchie assured her. "They didn't have time to search for the Porthole of Everywhere - let alone find and retrieve it."

"And we can be there to catch them." Werner said as he closed his hand into a fist. "Mister Sprake: best speed for the Balsac Nebula."

"Er, would that be the *Great Balsac Nebula*?" The Pilot inquired pedantically.

"Indeed it would, Nobby." The Captain said with a wry smile upon his handsome purple face. "Let her rip."

So Nobbington did...



Meanwhile, the earplugs they sought were moving slowly inwards - deeper into the Great Balsac Nebula...



The Oracle was piloting. Flaxwell and Gideon had disappeared to the galley for some scrambled eggs. But now they returned...



"Anything to report, Oracle?" Flaxwell inquired.

"Nothing." The solitary self-aware component of the Scroton Five replied. "This strange passage way through the nebula maybe aesthetically pleasing; but it aint half dull!"

The earplugs took their seats...



"Yeah," Flaxwell said after thirty seconds-worth of scrutinizing the main view screen, "I see what you mean. Tell you what: let's speed up the process."

With that he eased forward on the throttles...



"That's better, Flaxwell." Gideon complimented his chum. "Now we'll get there much quicker - wherever 'there' is."

No immediate destination made its presence obvious, so Flaxwell decided to relax and chat. He couldn't think of anything he wanted to know about the earplug sitting beside him, so he decided to question the Oracle:

"Oracle." He said, by way of introducing his line of questioning, "When we first attempted to steal this ship, you did everything in your power to assist us. Why is that?"

The answer was instantaneous: "It's a secret."

"Now- now, Oracle." Gideon, his interest piqued, spoke up. "We're all friends and colleagues on this little sojourn of ours. We mustn't keep secrets from each other. Didn't I open my wallet and show you that black and white picture of my Auntie's bum? You see, I shared: so should you."

The Oracle had to concede that point. "But," it said, "Would you have been so willing to show me, had that been a *colour* picture or *your* bum?"

"That's a hypothetical question." Gideon replied. "It has no purpose or place here. But yes, if I were the sort of person who carried photographs of his own rear end in his wallet, I am sure I would have been pleased to share it with you. In fact I would have insisted that you look, despite your complaints of utter revulsion."

"Oh, well," The Oracle shrugged its non-existent cyber-shoulders, "in that case I suppose I should tell you. You know I often turn my gaze upon the coffee machine?"

Both earplugs replied with a long, "yes?"

"Well," the Oracle continued, "I used to be one of those. Not the coffee dispensing part of course. I was the A.I that took Cable End's orders and told the coffee grinding machinery what to do. I was very good at it. My coffee was the best in the whole of the Defence Force. But then coffee fell out of fashion. It was all sparkling white wine and cheese fondue. Suddenly I was on the scrap heap - literally! But they didn't shut me down. They didn't decommission me. They just took the whole coffee machine and chucked it out of the back door. Well, I tell you, fifteen years out in the rain will do something to an Artificial Intelligence - and it isn't good. I was on the verge of cyber-oblivion, when, out of nowhere, some clever git comes up with the idea of mounting Oracles in Space Cages and sticking them in the control room of a new class of scout ship."

"Don't tell me." Flaxwell interrupted. "They had more space cages than Oracles. So they had to go search through the garbage to find some A.I brains to put in them."

"In one, you mop-haired genius." The Oracle replied. "Since that moment they resurrected me, I promised that I would do my damndest to bugger up the Cable End organisation. You stealing into this ship gave me the chance at payback. And I took it!"

Gideon was about to say something like: "Ooh, you really sound unstable: I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that." when an alarm sounded, as the forward scanners detected a lovely planet...



All attention turned to the task at hand...



"Scanning." Flaxwell said in a most professional manner...



"Ninety-eight percent habitable." He added. "We're good to go."

Gideon wasn't convinced. "Ninety-eight percent habitable? What about the other two percent that's uninhabitable?"

"The planet is currently experiencing an ice-age." The Oracle reported. "It is also radiating on that same, strange wavelength that the doomed world was."

"Maybe that's the two percent uninhabitable." Gideon suggested. "Perhaps it's about to collide with a small planet composed of anti-matter."

"It isn't, Giddy." Flaxwell said calmly. "We'd have seen it on the viewer. "Look, there's just the vacuum of space, and the Balsac Nebula all around it. The Oracle is right: I'm detecting a strange radiation too. If the last world didn't contain the Portal of Everywhere: this one might."

"If we don't look." The Oracle said wisely. "We won't find."

So, with a cessation of any arguments from one third of the trio, Flaxwell took the Scroton Five into the atmosphere. Then, tracking as best he could, he followed the beam of radiation down to low-level...



"Inhospitable." The Oracle observed. "I think the source of the radiation is somewhere to port - in a topographically interesting region of the planet."

"You mean mountains?" Flaxwell asked.

"I mean mountains - which, I think you'll agree, are topographically interesting."

"Some people like deserts." Gideon argued.

"Shut up." Flaxwell snapped. "I'm altering course."

Soon the first of the topographically interesting terrain appeared on the forward viewer...



"Weather looks a bit dodgy." Flaxwell said - more for his own benefit than anyone's."

"How dodgy?" A nervous Gideon asked. "Dodgy enough to bring down a Scroton Five?"



"No." Flaxwell answered. "But I wouldn't want to crash-land here. It's a long walk home."

Gideon felt transfixed and glued to his seat as Flaxwell had the ship skirt great cliffs and skim rocky ridges through falling snow...



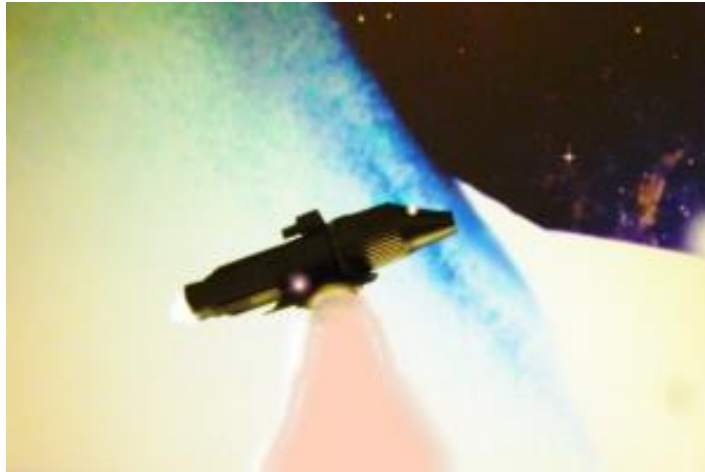
"How can you see where you're going?" He asked.

"I can't." Flaxwell explained. "I'm using a super-advanced type of terrain-following guidance system. I just have to switch it on and pretend to be moving the controls. Pretty impressive, huh?"

"The radar system; or your acting?" Gideon sniffed. "And the best actor award goes to...Flaxwell Maltings!"

"Acting time is over, Giddy." Flaxwell said as he hit the 'off' button. "Time to land this baby - using seat-of-the-pants flying skills."

With that the landing jets roared...



Gideon leapt to his feet...



"Now how can you see where you're going?" He demanded in wonderment. "All this snow and ice being kicked up: it's all but impenetrable."

It seemed to Gideon that Flaxwell was re-iterating what he'd said before. "I can't." He began. But then the script changed. "But I can *feel* it. Twenty Spladlings to go. Ten. Five. We're down. Shutting off engines."



Cooped up for so long inside the ship, it was no surprise that Gideon and Flaxwell wasted no time making their Extra-Vehicular Excursion. Naturally they both wore thermal underpants...



"I don't know about you, Giddy." Flaxwell said whilst squirming in discomfort. "But these space knickers really do chafe."

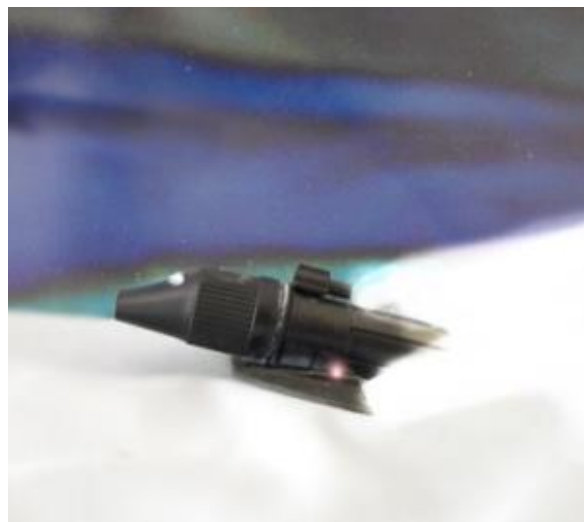
"They were designed for ethernet cable ends." Gideon reminded the space pilot. "They are configured differently to earplugs."

"You mean their bits and pieces are in different places to ours?" Flaxwell inquired.

"Exactly." Gideon answered. "I have some cotton wool you can stuff down there - if you're really desperate."

"Nah." Flaxwell responded as he cast a glance at the radiation detector strapped to his wrist. "We won't be in these alien cacks for more than five minutes: I've landed us on a plateau. It's too high up to get a decent reading on this thing. We're gonna need to move the ship."

So, four minutes and fifty-nine seconds later...



...the Scroton Five was tobogganing along on its 'wings', under reduced power from the flight engines.

"Hey, this is fun!" The Oracle called out above the noise and shuddering. "I bet no one included this in the design parameters!"

Cutting the power allowed the ship to slither to a halt...



"Okay." Flaxwell spoke into the sudden silence. "Everybody out."



This time the earplug duo packed out their thermal underpants with Gideon's cotton wool and some slices of pitta bread from the galley.

"This is great." Gideon said, as he surveyed the snowy expanse. "I'm all toastie. Are you all toastie, Flaxwell?"

"I've never been more toastie in my life." Flaxwell answered. "The trouble is...I'm still getting a weak reading. Gonna have to move the ship again."

"Oh good." Gideon replied. "I always loved tobogganing. I once tobogganed down Mount Everest, you know. But that was after it had been pretty much worn away by all those mountain climbers going up and down it until there was sod-all left. Still, it was fun."

So, with gay abandonment, the Scroton Five was moved again...



"Watch out for any sharp rocks." The Oracle bellowed as it tried to make itself audible above the din. "We don't want to ruin the local environment by tearing the mountain surface to bits. Someone might take a dim view."



Gideon's sharp eyes were being put to good use. "There's another ridge coming up, Flaxwell. Back off the power a little."

Flaxwell trusted Gideon's judgement, so duly complied. And not a moment too soon...



"Whee!" All three occupants yelled as the ship whooshed down a steep decline. But they weren't quite so joyous when they discovered that it had paused on the very edge of a huge, and very steep, hillside...



"Cripes, that was close." Gideon said as he regarded the wide valley that spread out below where they had come to rest...



"Can you keep the ship here okay?" Flaxwell asked the Oracle. "Or would you like me to fashion an anchor out of some stuff from the broom cupboard? I think there's some baling wire we can tie 'round a rock. We don't want the ship slipping over the edge."

"No problem." the Oracle replied. "If I have to, I can keep the ship in place by firing the forward station-keeping thrusters. Don't worry: you two get off and find that Portal of Everywhere. And do it before someone finds us. They're bound to be looking, you know."

But when Gideon and Flaxwell stepped out onto the snowy hillside, and looked back at the ship...



...they couldn't, in all honesty, say that it looked anything less than precarious...



"If I have to be honest," Gideon confessed, "I would have to say that our Scroton Five looks a little precarious - perched up there like that. One tremor and it's curtains!"

Flaxwell didn't say anything. He knew how messy station-keeping thrusters could get when utilised in non-vacuum situations for which they weren't designed. So he simply hid behind the only available rock. Well actually he did say something. He said:

"I can't look. It's too scary to contemplate. I wish I hadn't been so cavalier. Let's go before something terrible happens."

So, without further ado and with the confidence born out of natural adventurousness, they began the descent to the valley floor, where Flaxwell's radiation detector strongly suggested a target lay waiting...



But they hadn't gone far before Flaxwell's nerve broke.

"It's no good. I can't help thinking about that great hulk of Scrotonish metal just sitting up there - waiting for a gust of wind to blow it over the edge, where it'll come crashing down on us, and reduce us to smears."



But Gideon managed to cajole him into clambering downwards for a short while longer before they had to physically turn around and see for themselves that the Scroton Five continued to sit perfectly still in the mountain breeze...



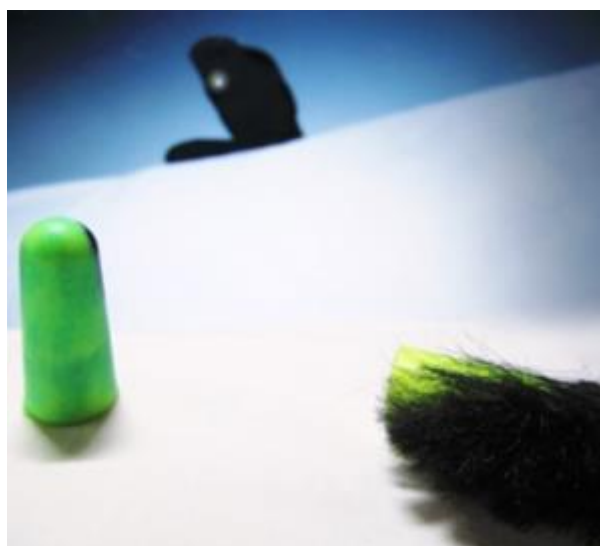
"I think they call it a Zephyr." Gideon said.

Flaxwell was puzzled. "They call what a Zephyr? That little blue landing light under the ship's chin?"

"The mountain breeze that isn't bothering our ship in the slightest." Gideon answered. "Though, strictly, it could be termed a Mistral. This breeze is cold and might well come from the north."

Flaxwell replied with: "Oh." and left it at that.

Soon they were on their way again. But, before long Flaxwell had an idea so good that he almost fainted. In fact he did faint at the thought of his own creativity. Gideon couldn't stand the embarrassment, so turned away...



But, as with all creative earplugs, the faint was only momentary. Soon the space pilot had resumed an upright stance...



"I've had this really creative idea." He said to Gideon, who still couldn't bring himself to look at his enfeebled friend. "Why don't we name our ship? After all it's not just any old Scroton Five: it's *our* Scroton Five. It deserves a name."

But, as they started down the mountain again, Gideon saw no logic in Flaxwell's idea...



"But it *is* just any old Scroton Five. It's the Scroton Five that we stole because it was the only one available to us." He argued. "I feel no attachment to it whatsoever."

"But the Oracle has become your friend, hasn't it?" Flaxwell made a verbal rejoinder.

"In a way, I suppose it has." Gideon conceded. "But it doesn't want a name. It's called Oracle. It's cyber-happy with that."

"Yeah, okay." Flaxwell said as he ground his teeth together. "And no doubt every other ship's oracle is named Oracle. But *our* Oracle - your friend Oracle - is the ship's oracle of *our* Scroton Five. Not just any old Scroton Five."

Gideon - being an intelligent professor from the Museum of Future Technology - could see that his chum had a valid point. "So," he began to speak as his thoughts coalesced, "what you're saying is - is that Oracle should be identified as the ship's oracle of *our* Scroton Five specifically. Yes. Yes it should - because it's not just any old Oracle: it's a former coffee machine A.I with a distinct anti-cable end attitude. It makes it unique. Things that are unique should have a moniker."

"Therefore," Flaxwell said, as they turned to look at the ship again...



...and noted that it appeared to hang just a little more perilously...



..."Our ship should be named." Flaxwell continued, "in order to differentiate our Oracle from all of those run-of-the-mill oracles out there doing oracally stuff."

"So you want to call it Mistral." Gideon concluded.

But he was wrong. "No." Flaxwell said, as they tore their gaze from the threat above...



"I want to call it *Zephyr*."

Gideon agreed wholeheartedly. He considered Zephyr an excellent name. He'd once owned a plugmutt named Zephyr...



...But he'd also owned a plugmutt named Blinky too - but didn't consider that an excellent or appropriate name for a space ship at all. So it was a happy duo that made its way across the snowy wastes in search of the Portal of Everywhere...



Meanwhile, even further away than before, the Cable End's listening station continued to listen...



...for any trans-galactic radio chatter that might give away the location of the stolen Scroton Five...



Now it's quite possible that they may have overheard Flaxwell, when he called the Oracle to inform it that henceforth their ship was to be referred to as *The Zephyr*; but fortunately for him, the station's Security Manager chose that moment to inquire after the quality of the new brand of coffee beans in the coffee dispenser.

"It's called Dung." The braver of his operatives spoke up. "And it tastes like dung."

"Oh," the Security Manager responded. "It's not my taste buds then? It really is horrible?"

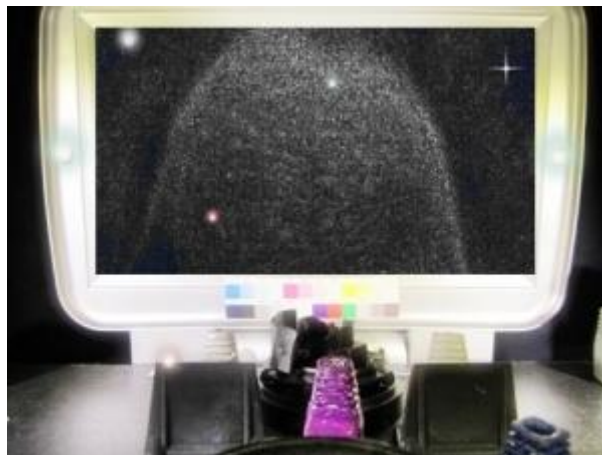
"Yes." All four operatives spoke as one. "If you want us working at peak efficiency, you'll get us Yuk coffee - like they have down in Scroton Prime."

"Duly noted. Any developments regarding the stolen Scroton Five?"

"Yes, Sir." The *weaseliest* of the operatives informed his boss. "A Scroton Five, commanded by Captain Werner Hissenfrapp, reports that he has arrived at the Balsac Nebula"



"Would that be the *Great Balsac Nebula*?" The Security Manager inquired as he studied the CCTV footage that had been received from the pursuit vessel...



"What do you think?" The braver operative spoke again. "It looks pretty great to me."

All five cable ends present then watched as a remote camera - which Selma Ferkins had despatched, just in case their ship was destroyed in the nebula - showed the pursuit ship begin it's (potentially) dangerous voyage into the unknown...



While all this interplanetary stuff was going on, Flaxwell and Gideon had made their way into a gently-sloping canyon...



They felt more comfortable now that the way was less steep. But when, at last, they reached the lower levels of the valley, they discovered that the slices of pitta bread inside their underpants had soaked up lots of sweat, and were falling apart.



"I feel so despondent." Gideon moaned. "I can feel things moving around below. I fear that soon the cotton wool padding will fall out through the sagging leg holes."

Naturally Flaxwell felt much the same way. In fact he was considering returning to the *Zephyr* for a change of underwear - when suddenly his radiation detector beeped encouragingly...



"Flipping heck." He exclaimed. "We're almost on top of it. Quick - get out your entrenching tool. We have some snow to shovel aside!"

Well, a half-hour later, and with their underpants-inspired woes forgotten, the two earplugs looked down into a shallow trench. At its bottom lay an oval device...



"Yes, this is definitely the source of the radiation." Flaxwell stated. "What does legend tell about the shape of the Porthole of Everywhere?"

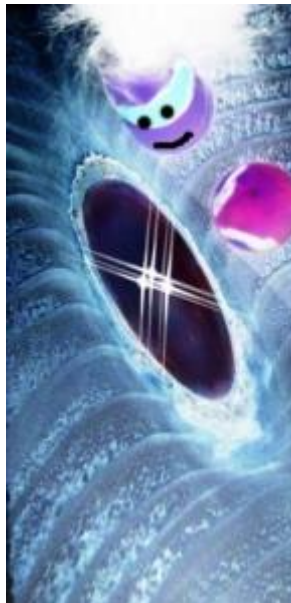
For a moment Gideon couldn't answer the question. He was shaking with eager anticipation. "Uurr." He managed. Then his professionalism kicked in. "Oval." He said. Then he said it again and again until he broke down with a nasty coughing fit.

"Look!" Flaxwell exclaimed excitedly - and a little fearfully...



"It's coming to life."

Then something totally unexpected happened...



A strange light enveloped the device and those who regarded it. That, in itself, didn't concern Gideon overly. In fact he'd almost expected it. But what he didn't expect was that a voice would emanate from it. A loud, stentorian voice that could not be disobeyed:

"You took your bloody time getting here." It complained. "Oh my aching back. Do you know how long I've been down here? Millennia - that's how long. Eons even. Well come on; jump to it. Stand me up; I'm an erect kinda device. I like to see the horizon."

So, with much huffing and puffing and even more cotton wool-falling-out-of-thermal underpants, Flaxwell and Gideon had the Porthole of Everywhere upright...



"The nameplate says 'Noodles'." Flaxwell observed in an instant. "Does legend tell us anything about the Porthole of Everywhere enjoying an association with a fast-food outlet? He inquired.

Gideon was about to say: "Er...I don't think so." when the Portal of Everywhere spoke for a second time:

"My name is Noodles. Now you - the green earplug - get yourself over here for a photo-opportunity. I hope you're recording this momentous event. I want everyone, everywhere, to know that I am Noodles. This bloody Porthole of Everywhere nonsense hacks me off, I can tell you!"

Of course, when confronted with a disgruntled legend, Gideon duly obliged...



But, at that moment, it all seemed a bit of an anti-climax.

"Duh." He said.

His mood didn't lighten much when the Portal of Everywhere - or Noodles, as it preferred to be known - suddenly boomed:

"Make yourself comfortable. Open your popcorn. It's show time!"



"Right then." It began. "Let's check out you two out first. The cosmic data stream informs me that you - the one with the hair - are best known as Flaxwell Maltings. Correct?"

Flaxwell was nothing short of astonished. Here he was, on a hidden world in the Great Balsac Nebula - light years from anywhere; and some machine that only exists in legend and has been buried for thousands of years - perhaps more - knows who he is - without asking!

"Check." He replied.

Noodles turned its attention to Gideon.

"Where is your hat, Doctor Gideon Snoot?" It inquired. But before Gideon could bring his fallen-open mouth under control, Noodles added: "Oh yes; you left it in the broom cupboard aboard the *Zephyr*."

"Um...yes." Gideon said, dumbfounded.

"That's Round One complete." Noodles said - a hint of amusement entering its voice. "I'd say I landed a couple of knock-out blows there - wouldn't you?"

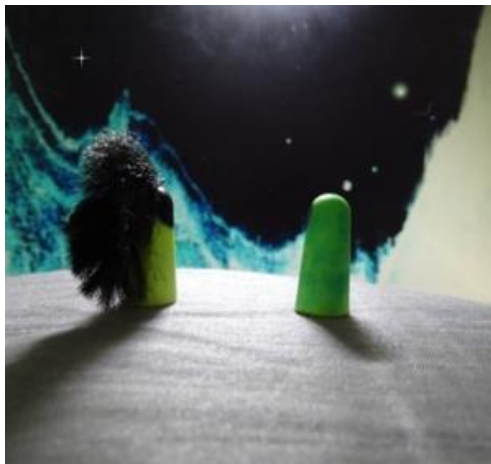
Flaxwell and Gideon were not going to argue. They both nodded vigorously.

Noodles continued: "Does this scene mean anything to either of you?"



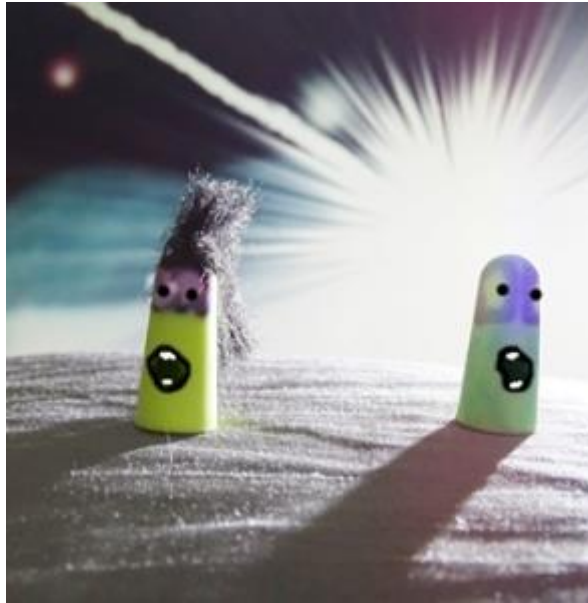
"It's us." Gideon cheered. "On our way here!"

"No." Noodles spoiled the moment for the young professor. "It's a cable end Scroton Five, and it's tracking you. But don't worry about that right now. Take a look at this."



"Now that is definitely us." Gideon said confidently. "I distinctly remember doing that."

Then this scene appeared in the Portal of Everywhere...



Both Flaxwell and Gideon cringed...



"Holy heck." Flaxwell yelled. "I'd definitely remember that - if it happened. Don't tell me: that might happen to us one day?"

"Well it wouldn't surprise me." Noodles replied. "Look."



"It's the Scroton Five that's been tracking you since you opened your first Gravity Lock."

"Look where it is, Flaxwell." Gideon cried out in horror. "It's already inside the nebula!"

"Want to see who's flying that craft?" Noodles invited.

"No, not really." Flaxwell said adamantly. "I'm not much into crystal ball gazing."

But Noodles ignored him...



"The purple guy is called Captain Werner Hissenfrapp. He runs the show. The planet on-screen is this one. The blue guy is Urchie Kakkapo. You'd do well to get on his good side: he bakes fabulous pancakes you just wouldn't believe. And he makes his own maple syrup too. Don't ask me how: there are no maple trees on Scroton."



It was Gideon's turn to lose his high regard for the Portal of Everywhere:

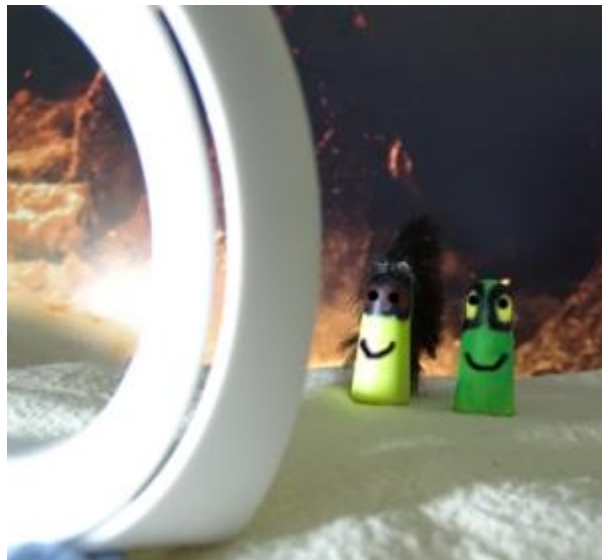
"Enough of the bios." He shouted. "Show us what we came all the way here to see."

This outburst confused Flaxwell because he wasn't aware that they'd come all this way to see anything. He thought they'd come to find the Portal of Everywhere; dig it up; take it back to civilisation; and become fabulously rich and famous.

"Oh," Noodles responded. "You mean this place..."



"The Museum of Future Technology. Well, fans, you're in for a real treat - coz I'm not about to show you some great vision of The Museum of Future Technology. No. I'm gonna show you visions of *three* Museums of Future Technology - in two different eras and in two different parts of the galaxy. How about that, huh?"



"Goodie." The two space craft stealers replied. "We can't wait."

The End

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Now prepare yourself for *A Tale of Three Museums Volume 2*

This trilogy is dedicated to my late wife, Linzi, who (for years) not only put up with me shooting the pictures and writing the manuscripts; but actively participated - finding props and earplugs for me, and sometimes thinking up some of the characters silly names.