

30,000 words

**Johnny B. Weeyerd and the Cosmic Annihilator**

By

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## CHAPTER ONE

Far away, in a distant sector of an even more distant galaxy, the second most feared battle cruiser in all the known universe prowled slowly through space.

Although 'slowly' is perhaps not the correct word to describe a spaceship travelling at around eight million miles per second. 'Stupidly fast' might be one way to describe such a speed. 'Probably impossible' could be another. For a spacecraft as advanced as *The Destruktor*, however, eight million miles per second was very slow indeed.

On board the ship, and surrounded on all sides by terrified minions scurrying around pressing important-looking buttons, sat Salak the Eviller, the second most evil being in all the known universe. There was a very good reason why the minions were terrified rather than just, say, panic-stricken like they usually were. Salak the Eviller - destroyer of worlds, oppressor of the innocent, and first in line to the throne

of the planet Galaag Six - was bored. Very bored, in fact, and a minion's life was not an easy one when Salak the Eviller was bored.

"You," Salak barked. He stabbed a clawed finger towards a particularly frightened looking underling, who busily pushed flashing buttons on a nearby console.

"M-me, Lord Salak?" the minion replied, wringing his hands nervously as he turned, head bowed, to his leader.

"What are you doing?" sneered Salak. The alien's top lip curled to reveal a mouthful of teeth sharp enough to make a Great White Shark whistle quietly in appreciation.

The minion hesitated, his mind frantically racing to come up with an answer. He had no idea what he was doing. None of the minions did. *The Destruktor* was powered and controlled entirely by the unbreakable will of Salak and needed no-one else to steer it. Once upon a time he'd thought he and the other minions were on board to prevent Salak having nobody to talk to, but he soon realised that they were all actually there to prevent Salak having nobody to kill.

"Pushing buttons, your greatness," the underling gulped. He hoped that would be explanation enough. He hoped that would satisfy Salak. It didn't.

"Why?"

"B-because," stammered the minion, taking a deep breath, "you told me to."

"Did I, indeed?"

"Yes, sir. Y-you told me to look busy, sir."

All four of Salak's eyes narrowed as he regarded the minion with suspicion. The small, furry underling, for his part, shrunk back in fear, silently praying to any gods which might happen to be listening.

The captain's chair Salak sat on creaked under his immense weight as he leaned forward and stroked his chin, thoughtfully.

"Then why," he growled, "don't you look busy?"

"Oh, I *am* busy, Lord Salak!" the minion hurriedly insisted. As quickly as he could, he spun back to the completely pointless blinking buttons of the computer console.

By the time he'd reached his fingers out to flick the first switch, however, he didn't have any. Nor did he have any hands, feet, or anything else for that matter. A small cloud of dust floated down to the floor where moments ago the minion had stood.

Salak leaned back in his chair, his fingertips still glowing yellow from the disintegrator blasts they had just fired. He folded his arms in front of him and sighed. Destroying the minion had provided a few seconds worth of entertainment, but now even that was over.

He hated having to go as slowly as this, but even the second most evil being in the universe had rules to stick to. There was an order to things which must be followed. He knew that. He understood that was the way things had always been. Unfortunately, the fact he understood what the rules were didn't change the fact that he was fantastically, mind-numbingly bored.

"You," he growled, menacingly.

"M-me, Lord Salak?"

"*What* are you doing?"

#

Slightly less far away, in a not quite so distant galaxy, the third most feared battle cruiser in all the known universe thundered through space. Although moving just a little bit faster than *The Destruktor*, this ship – *The Annoyer* – was travelling as fast as it possibly could without taking the risk that its wings might fall off.

On board the ship, and surrounded on all sides by nobody at all, Krygor the Evil – the third most evil being in all the known universe - held his foot down on the accelerator pedal and clung to the steering wheel for dear life.

Despite having been involved – albeit barely - in the conquest and destruction of countless worlds, despite having scoured the cosmos for new races to enslave on behalf of his home world of Galaag Six, Krygor couldn't quite manage to shake off the nagging feeling that right now he was completely and utterly lost.

He tore his eyes from the enormous display screen, which showed the vast, infinite emptiness of space, and glanced down at the map spread out across his knees. Unfamiliar planets lay dotted around, orbiting strange stars all over the page. He could see an asteroid field off to his left which didn't appear anywhere on the chart. There was a strange, reddish blob on the map which he'd never seen the like of before. At first he thought it may be some kind of wormhole, before realising that it was, in fact, a blob of tomato sauce.

Even accounting for spilled food products, though, the map across his knees bore little relation to the galaxy which was currently swooshing by outside. Krygor sighed, feeling an all too familiar tingle of panic rising in his stomach. Maybe he should have taken that left at the Rigerian System after all.

Somewhere out there, zipping through space, was the most destructive and powerful object that had ever existed. If Krygor didn't find it soon then his elder brother, Salak the Eviller, would get his chance, and take all the glory, just as he had done on countless occasions before.

The big alien gritted his teeth and gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned bone white. Not this time. This time Krygor was determined he would not fail in his mission. He would retrieve the Cosmic Annihilator and return triumphantly home to Galaag Six where he would receive a well earned hero's welcome. Salak would not rob him of victory again!

Krygor peered down at the small blue and green planet circled in red on his map. The planet he hoped he was currently heading in vaguely the right direction towards. The planet which lay directly in the path of the Cosmic Annihilator.

The planet Earth.

#

Even less far away, on the outskirts of this very galaxy, an otherwise unremarkable hot dog zipped through space towards Earth at unimaginable speeds. Now, technically at this point in time the object in question wasn't actually a hot dog, but in just a short while – a little under fifteen minutes, in fact - it would be!

## CHAPTER TWO

"What's this?" asked Johnny, warily, as Delia the Dinner Lady clanked a chipped plate down onto his outstretched tray.

"Wassit look like?" slurred Delia, startling the hungry queue of waiting children with the sheer force with which she deposited a helping of beans onto Johnny's plate.

"I don't know," he shrugged. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the mystery item which sat ominously on his tray. "That's why I asked."

"Issa hot dog," the dinner lady scowled, already turning her attention to the next person in the line. "Next!"

"A hot dog?"

"Yes!"

"But it's purple."

"Issa hot dog," Delia snarled. She gave her dirty ladle a threatening wave in Johnny's direction. "Iss supposed to be purple. Next!"

#

Cautiously, Johnny lowered himself onto the bench next to his younger brother, Jack, and gently placed his tray on the table, as if it might explode at any minute. He'd hoped his lunch might somehow look more appetising in the baking hot June sunshine of the school playground. If anything, it looked worse.

"What," asked Jack, as he edged himself further along the bench away from Johnny's tray, "is that?"

"It's a hot dog," Johnny replied.

"A hot dog?"

"Yes."

"But it's purple."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too."

The brothers sat in silence for a few moments, considering the many and complex implications of the purple hot dog on the plate. It didn't look all that unusual. The bun in which the sausage nestled was the right shape and colour, and looked to be of vaguely the right texture. The sausage itself was shaped like any other sausage. In fact, had Johnny been colour blind, he'd most likely not have spotted anything wrong with the hot dog at all.

But he wasn't colour blind, and there was no escaping the fact that his hot dog sausage was a dark, almost threatening purple. It reminded him of a particularly nasty bruise he'd once had.

Around them, at other tables, children nattered noisily as they slurped and munched through their own lunches. It was just four short weeks until the school broke up for summer, and the excited chattering from all directions made it clear how pleased most pupils were about having reached the holiday home stretch.

In fact in all the school only Jack was unhappy about the prospect of missing out on seven glorious weeks of rigorous, thought-provoking education. He had been disappointed that his carefully worded petition to keep the school open for the entire

year had been largely ignored by his fellow students. He had been even more disappointed when some of those same fellow students had decided to flush his head down the toilet as a warning that he should never again organise another petition. Despite being the youngest person in the school by quite some years, Jack despaired of the youth of today sometimes, he really did. Right now, however, there were more pressing issues to think about.

"Are you going to eat it?" asked Jack, still fascinated by the colour of the *thing* on his brother's plate.

"I don't know," mused Johnny. He prodded the purple sausage with the handle of his plastic fork, half expecting it to leap at his throat and strangle him to death. "Do you think I should?"

"Yes I do," Jack nodded, solemnly. "However I should remind you that in the event of your untimely death, no-one would benefit more so than me."

"You're not getting my room."

"We'll see," Jack smiled, innocently. "So are you going to eat it or not?"

"I think so," Johnny decided, giving the meat an experimental sniff. It smelled like a perfectly ordinary hot dog. "I mean didn't I read somewhere recently that you're something like three times more likely to be abducted by aliens than you are to die eating a hot dog?"

"In The Beano, perhaps," Jack conceded, quietly.

And so it was decided: At twelve years old, and being of sound mind and body, Jonathan Benjamin Weeyerd was going to eat the discoloured hot dog. He stared at the plump, purple sausage and took a deep breath. Any minute now he was going to tuck right in. Any minute now.

"Well, well, well," whined an unpleasantly familiar voice from nearby, "if it isn't the Weird Brothers."

Johnny rolled his eyes and sighed. Here it came then – his daily encounter with Stan. While most people would dismiss Stan as little more than a violent idiot with an inferiority complex – which he was – there was more to the bully than that, although admittedly not much.

Coming from a long, well established family line of school bullies, Stan prided himself on being something of a traditionalist. Where more modern thinking bullies might have progressed to psychologically hammering on their victims via text message or e-mail, Stan still believed firmly in the merits of a good, old fashioned wedgie. He was 'Stan Hitchen: Old School School Bully', and he was the best at what he did.

"Yes," Johnny nodded. "That's us."

"No," grinned Stan, taking great delight in his own comedy genius, "*Weird.*"

"Weeyerd," repeated Johnny, uncertainly.

"No, you're not getting it," Stan continued, irritated. "Not Weeyerd, *Weird.* W-E-I-R-D."

"But it sounds exactly the same," Jack interjected.

"Shut it, shrimp," the bully snapped, as he stepped closer and loomed over the younger of the two brothers. "You done my homework yet?"

"Yes," Jack sighed, "your informed and frankly ground breaking opinions on Einstein's Theory of Relativity will both delight and astound Mr. Phillips."

Stan nodded and turned his attention to Johnny.

"And you," he continued, "you dumbled it down?"

"Yes," Johnny replied. He thrust his hand inside his schoolbag and pulled out a neat bundle of typed pages. "You'll get about eighty-seven percent."

"I'd better," the bully growled, snatching the pages from Johnny's grasp. He didn't have to tell them what would happen if they were lying to him. Stan had an uncanny ability to find out exactly what his victims were most afraid of. Once he'd

discovered their greatest fear, he'd take great delight in doing it to them. Slowly.

"Ooh!" the bully suddenly exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. "A hot dog!"

"That's my lunch!" Johnny protested. Stan paid him no attention, and greedily swiped up the hot dog. In one, fluid movement, he crammed the whole thing into his cavernous mouth. The bully barely bothered to chew before swallowing the sausage and belching loudly in Johnny's face.

"No, it was my lunch," he corrected. "Bye, *weirdoes!*" he grinned as he began to walk away. "Get it?"

"Yes," the brothers mumbled wearily in unison. Johnny's eyes fell sadly on the distinctly hot dog shaped space on his plate, which his beans were now making every effort to fill. He'd been just about to eat it. Another second and it would have been gone.

"I can't believe you just let him get away with that!" snapped Holly Masters as she steam-trained angrily across the playground in the brothers' direction.

"Oh great," Jack muttered. "It's your She-Demon of a girlfriend."

"Ex-girlfriend," Johnny corrected, quietly.

"How could you just sit there while he ate your lunch?" Holly demanded. She had arrived at the table now, and stood looming over them, her hands on her hips.

"Why didn't you stand up to him?"

"Er, because he'd kill me?" Johnny offered, trying not to look Holly in the face. While their relationship had been a short one, and while it had been him who had brought it to an abrupt end after she booked them cinema tickets a week in advance and he decided he couldn't handle the commitment, Johnny couldn't help but think Holly looked really cute when she was angry. That way, he knew, lay Valentine's cards, hand-holding in the park and disapproving looks whenever he suggested sticking the PlayStation on. And *that* way, he knew, lay madness.

"Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees," Holly insisted, slamming her hands down on the table with enough force to make several beans jump off Johnny's plate.

"I'm not dying for the sake of a purple hot dog, Holly."

"I'm not talking about the hot dog! The hot dog itself isn't important," she began, before the significance of what had just been said filtered its way through to her enraged brain. "Hang on – hot dogs aren't purple."

"This one was," Johnny shrugged.

"Oh right," Holly hesitated. She felt her internal gearbox shift unexpectedly from 'angry' to 'confused'. "So, what, you weren't going to eat it anyway?"

"Oh no, I was," Johnny replied. "I was just working up the courage."

"Euw," winced his ex, her face contorting in disgust. "Why would you want to eat a purple hot dog?"

"Because every school day for the last month I've eaten salad, or pasta, or tasteless sandwiches made with bread I can't even pronounce," Johnny began, passionately. This time it was his turn to rant. "And so on the one day of the month that I'm given the opportunity to eat junk food – the one glorious, special day the canteen staff, the government, and that fat-tongued bloke off the telly decide we're allowed to pig out – then there is *nothing* I want more than to have myself a hot dog, purple or otherwise."

"Well said!" Jack said, nodding his approval.

Johnny bowed his head, courteously, as children from nearby tables loudly clapped their agreement.

"But it's still not worth dying for," he concluded, hastily.

#

In the upper atmosphere of the planet Earth, the most destructive and powerful object in all existence – which still at this point was very much *not* a delicious

sausage-based snack of German origin – began to slow its descent from ‘unimaginably fast’ to merely ‘incredibly fast’. In a few moments time it would be travelling ‘very fast’ and then ‘fast’ and then ‘slow’. Soon it would come to a sudden, yet completely unnoticed stop.

Soon, but not quite yet.

#

“I can’t believe you were seriously going to eat it,” Holly scowled. She had decided she didn’t like being confused, and so she had made the switch back to angry mode, which felt much more comfortable “You could have died!”

“Apparently the statistics on Johnnyworld beg to differ,” Jack explained. He quickly moved along the bench in order to avoid a dead leg from his brother.

“Look, stop judging me!” Johnny exclaimed. “I didn’t just rush into the decision, you know? I thought about it long and hard, and I decided that no matter what it looked like, no matter what colour it was, I just really, *really* wanted a--” He looked down at his plate and hesitated. A perfectly normal coloured sausage in a bun sat where just moments ago only beans had been. “Hot dog?” he finished, puzzled. “Where did that come from?”

Jack and Holly peered at the plate and shrugged in unison. Johnny looked around, expectantly, but nobody nearby seemed to have noticed the apparent sudden appearance from thin air of the junk food.

“Well it didn’t just fall from the sky,” he reasoned, still scanning around for whoever could have deposited it on his plate without him noticing. All his instincts and common sense told him that hot dogs which suddenly appeared from nowhere were almost certainly not hot dogs to be trusted. It’d probably be even more dangerous to eat this hot dog than it would the last one. At least he’d known where that one had come from. And yet ...

"You're not!" Holly gasped, as Johnny lifted the food to his lips. "That could have come from anywhere!"

"I'm hungry," he replied, firmly. "And it would be wrong to let perfectly good food go to waste."

And with that Johnny opened his mouth and took a large, satisfying bite of the most destructive and powerful object which had ever existed.

"Hmm," he muttered, between swallows, "needs mustard."

### CHAPTER THREE

"Pardonnez-moi, tout le monde, pardonnez-moi!" apologised Mrs. Matheson, as she scurried into the classroom, ushering a green-faced Stan in ahead of her. "Sorry I'm late, but I had to help the ambulance crew pump poor Stanny's stomach."

Johnny made no effort to conceal his broad grin as a groaning Stan shuffled past him and took up his seat at the back of the class. Moments like these didn't come along too often. He looked across at the seat in front of his. It was obvious even from just the back of Jack's head that he was thoroughly enjoying Stan's misery, too.

Despite an age gap of four years, Jack's genius level intellect had seen him skipped forward to the same year as Johnny, where he still managed to outshine everyone else in the class, teachers included. This did not, it had to be said, do his popularity any favours.

"Anyway," Mrs. Matheson smiled, patting her windswept grey hair back into place. "Bonjour, classe."

"Bonjour, Madame Matheson," the class murmured in reply.

"As you all know," Mrs. Matheson continued, as she pushed her monstrously thick glasses further up the bridge of her nose, "today is my last day, and as of tomorrow Mr. Greaves will be standing in until a replacement can be found."

The class groaned at the mere mention of their dreaded headmaster's name.

"Oh, he's not that bad!" the teacher assured.

"I heard he ate class 4b."

"Don't be silly, Holly," Mrs. Matheson dismissed. "That was never proved."

"Can Mr. Greaves even speak French?" another girl asked.

"Of course he can, Mr. Greaves can do anything," Mrs. Matheson replied. "Or so he tells us all on a regular basis, at least," she added, quietly. "Now some of you, I imagine, may have made cards or brought farewell gifts ..." She looked around the class, expectantly. "Anyone?" The pupils glanced among themselves, mildly embarrassed. "Twenty-seven years of loyal service?" Mrs. Matheson squeaked, her eyes desperately flitting from unmoving child to unmoving child. "No?"

Finally, with a loud scraping of his chair, Jack got to his feet. Johnny and Holly shared a worried look as the younger Weeyerd brother noisily cleared his throat. Johnny quietly prayed that Jack wasn't about to make his usual - and often physically damaging - mistake of speaking on behalf of the whole class.

"I think I speak on behalf of the whole class," Jack began, gesturing around at his fellow students. Behind him, his brother cringed. "When I say that while it was moderately enjoyable making your acquaintance, we're all very much looking forward to the stricter, more disciplined regime which will almost certainly be afforded by Mr. Greaves, however temporarily, upon your retirement.

"That notwithstanding," Jack continued, oblivious to the glowers coming from the other members of the class, "I think we'd all like to wish you all the best for the future by joining together in a rousing, perhaps even heartfelt rendition of 'For She's a Jolly Good'-- Eek!" A hard tug on Jack's blazer pulled him down into his seat.

"Shut up," hissed Johnny, "or you're going to get yourself flushed again!"

At the back of the class, forgetting his self-pity and pain for just a few seconds, Stan stared at Jack's back and cackled wickedly.

#

A choking cloud of red dust billowed up from the ground as *The Annoyer* descended unsteadily from the stars. With a grinding of metal and some panicked cursing from its pilot, the ship touched shakily down on the barren, rocky planetary surface. There it stood for several minutes, silent and unmoving, save for the occasional *thud* and mumble of complaint from within.

Eventually, a wide section of wall slid sideways, and a slick, silver staircase lowered to the ground.

"Hellooo?" Krygor bellowed over the speakers in his space-suit, as he stepped warily from his battle cruiser. In all directions around the spacecraft, the inhospitable Martian landscape stretched out, empty and desolate and bleak. "Anyone here?"

Nothing.

"Hello?" he tried again, louder this time.

Still nothing.

"That's strange," he mumbled, fumbling through thick gloves as he tried to unfold the map once again. "I was sure this was the right place."

He peered through the rapidly fogging glass of his space helmet at the blue and green circle on the map, then down at the garish red rock below his feet. He sighed, making the condensation inside his helmet even worse. There was no denying it, this was the wrong place. Someone somewhere had obviously made some grave miscalculation when working out the co-ordinates, and Krygor had an unpleasant sinking feeling that it was him.

Well that was it then: He was lost. Once again, his own incompetence meant that Salak would swoop in and take all the glory. He had failed himself, he had failed

Galaag Six, and – most worryingly of all – he had failed its ruler, the vile, despicable ‘Evillest’. He considered what The Evillest might do to him when she discovered his failure, and shuddered inside his space suit.

“No,” he fretted, “Mother is not going to like this one little bit.”

Suddenly a small screen on the wrist of his suit bleeped into life. A faint blip pulsed briefly on the display, before fading once again from view as quickly as it had appeared. Krygor gave the device a shake and gazed at it, confused. The blip had come from behind him, but that was impossible, wasn’t it? He regarded the map again for a long time.

Eventually, a thought struck him. Despite being on an entirely uninhabited planet, Krygor had a quick look around to make sure no-one was watching. When he was certain nobody was around to see, he quickly turned the map the right way up. The alien twisted around to face the direction the blip on his scanner had come from, and stared hard into the dark reaches of the galaxy.

There, far off in the distance - so small as to be barely visible - a tiny blue and green circle orbited silently through space.

#

“Shame about Stan, eh?” Holly smirked, as she, Johnny, and the rest of the class poured out into the corridor.

“Tragic, yeah,” Johnny chuckled. “Still that’ll teach him to eat stuff he shouldn’t.”

“Oh, like you did, you mean?”

“Do you see me requiring medical attention?” he asked. “In fact, I’ve never felt better.” To illustrate his point Johnny jumped into the air and clicked his heels together, making Holly snort with laughter.

“That,” announced Jack as he walked up behind them, “was perhaps the single most undignified thing I have ever seen.”

"Would have been less embarrassing than 'For She's a Jolly Good Fellow,'" Johnny retorted.

"On the contrary," said Jack, pulling his schoolbag higher on his shoulder, "I believe our assembled classmates would have relished the opportunity to come together in tuneful celebration of--"

"Get him!"

"Oh no!" Jack wailed, spinning on his heels in time to see Stan and two of his cronies hurtling towards him. "Not again!"

The bullies barely slowed as they scooped Jack up under the arms and dragged him, kicking and screaming, along the corridor in the direction of the boys' toilets.

"Aren't you going to do something?" Holly shrieked as Jack and his flailing feet disappeared through the toilet door.

"Yeah," Johnny nodded, reluctantly. "I'll go find him a towel."

"I meant *before* he has his head flushed down the toilet!"

"What, try to stop three of them?" Johnny scoffed. "No chance!"

"You're such a coward," Holly snapped.

"You do it then!"

"I would, but it's the *boys'* toilets," she replied, almost knocking him off his feet as she shoved him towards the door. "Now go save your brother!"

#

The creaking of the toilet door could barely be heard over Jack's shrill screams of terror, as Johnny slowly pushed it open and stepped inside. His feet splashed in a smelly yellow puddle on the tiled floor. Could he already be too late?

"Get him in!" bellowed a voice he instantly recognised as Stan's. Johnny's heart sank as he realised he was still in time to attempt his daring rescue. Steadying

his nerve as best he could, he stepped further into the bathroom, and peeked into the first toilet cubicle.

"Sorry to interrupt," Johnny interrupted. His voice wobbled like a drunk on a bicycle. He cleared his throat, hoping it'd stop him sounding like he was about to start crying. Four faces turned in his direction, only one of which looked pleased to see him. "But it's just ... I mean, would you mind ..." He took a deep breath. "Can you let him go?"

"No," Stan scowled, not taking a second to even consider the request.

"Go on," Johnny urged, weakly.

"Not a chance!"

"Okay, right, well if you're determined to flush him – and I can see why you would be," Johnny reasoned, "how about I take him home and flush him there instead?"

"You what?" another of the bullies scoffed.

"I'd prefer that, actually!" Jack chipped in, before a podgy hand was clamped down over his mouth, silencing him.

"It'd be no problem, honestly," Johnny assured. "I could do it a couple of times for good measure."

"How about," Stan snarled, squeezing past his fellow torturers and out of the cubicle. "We flush the both of you?"

"W-What?" Johnny stumbled.

"You gave me that dodgy hot dog," hissed the thug, grabbing Johnny by the back of the neck, "it's only fair that you spend as long in the bog as I did!"

"Come on, we can talk about this!" Johnny protested. Stan manhandled him into the second cubicle. He clearly wasn't in a chatty mood.

"Ready?" Stan bellowed to his giggling cronies in the cubicle next door. "On three."

"Come on, Stan!" pleaded Johnny. He struggled to break the bully's vice-like grip as it edged his head closer to the dirty toilet bowl. "This is just silly!"

"One."

Through the flimsy wooden wall of the cubicle, Johnny could hear Jack's pointless struggle against the two pairs of hands which tightly held him.

"Stop squirming, you little geek!"

"Two."

The yellow water of the toilet lay just inches below Johnny's head. The choking stench filled his nostrils and made his stomach go tight. He tried in vain to push himself backwards away from it, to break free. It was no use. There was no escaping it. Stan was too strong.

Johnny closed his eyes and hurriedly took a deep, desperate breath. As his lungs filled with acrid air, something stirred somewhere deep down within him.

"Thre--"

With an ear-splitting crash, Stan flew backwards through the air. He yelped in pain as he smashed into the graffiti stained wall. The impact shattered a spider web pattern into the brick red tiles behind him. With a winded groan the bully slid slowly to the soaking wet ground, unconscious.

As Stan slumbered on the floor, and his cronies in the cubicle next door wondered what had just happened, Johnny stood up and spun around. Had anyone been standing in the cubicle with him at that point, the first thing they would have noticed was the expression of absolute surprise on his face. The second thing they would have noticed were his eyes - wide open, staring in disbelief, and glowing brightly with unfathomable cosmic power.

#

At just that very moment, several hundred miles above the toilet cubicle, the school, and the world at large, a tracking system on board the third most feared battle cruiser in all the universe blinked ominously into life.

“Aha!” cried Krygor the Evil, his massive muscles bulging in barely contained excitement. “There you are!”

## CHAPTER FOUR

With a groan and a clatter, an old, wire mesh elevator clanked to the floor of an underground corridor. Its sole occupant swore in surprise as the lift jerked unsteadily to its sudden stop. Still cursing, he placed one carefully manicured hand on the rusted handle and – with some effort – slid the protesting door open.

The screech of metal on metal rebounded off the damp walls of the long, stone passageway. It echoed along the corridor, before bouncing off the thick steel doors at the far end and making its way back.

With a splash, an expensive, British made shoe stepped from the lift and into a puddle of something too dark and smelly to be just water. The man cursed under his breath, but tried not to think too much about what he'd just plunged his foot into. This corridor used to be part of the city's sewer system, after all.

Picking his next steps more carefully, he made his way along the passageway, doing his best to ignore the squelching sound his left sock was currently making. Had there been anyone else around, he'd have been embarrassed. As it was, he was simply angry. Angry, and very, very impatient.

He didn't have cause to use the corridor very often. Even on the few occasions he did have reason to come this way, he tried to avoid it. It was a former waste outlet pipe, for goodness sake! No place for a man of his status and breeding. What would the chaps from Oxford say if they knew he was spending his afternoon strolling through the sewers? He'd be a laughing stock.

Of course, the reason for his visit was no laughing matter. Something had happened. Something with potentially enormous consequences - not only for himself, but for the entire world.

As he squidged his way to the thick, steel door, the man stopped and gently cleared his throat. The shiny metal which blocked his path shimmered slightly - an effect he knew was caused by the heat from the dozens of invisible laser beams which criss-crossed in front of it. Were he to reach out and touch the metal's surface he'd quickly find a smouldering stump where his hand had been. Fortunately, he had no need to knock.

"Robin Newton," he announced. His voice always sounded clipped and slightly irritated, and today it was even more so.

"Robin Newton," echoed a soft, female voice. "Secretary of State for Defence."

Robin checked his nails as he waited for the computer to run its analysis. He frowned as he spotted the cuticle of his left index finger had a deep scratch running across it, no doubt inflicted by the ragged metal of the lift door. *Typical*, he thought, *the end of the world and not a manicurist to be found.*

"Voice analysis complete," intoned the computer. "Welcome to Number 10, Mr Newton."

With a low whine, the double doors swished open, revealing another, almost identical corridor on the other side. The Defence Secretary didn't move. His eyes fixed on the shimmering haze of heat which still hung in the air before him. The

lasers were an additional security feature added by the previous Prime Minister following an attempted break-in. Since then they had succeeded in stopping anyone else attempting to breach security, but had also spelled a messy end for two Home Secretaries and a Chancellor of the Exchequer.

“Password: Tokyo,” he announced.

“Password accepted.”

Almost immediately, the haze vanished, and Robin stepped safely through the doorway into the second corridor. Behind him, the security systems reactivated, and the doors clamped together with a deafening *clang*.

It would have been so much easier just to use the front door. He understood that protocol demanded the secret entrance be used in situations of national emergency, he just didn't understand why. It wasn't like any of the press outside the Downing Street gates would have any idea about the purpose of his visit, so he didn't see any need for all the cloak and dagger nonsense. At least there were no murky brown puddles to step in when you used the front door.

The Prime Minister would be waiting in the secure bunker, he knew. Matthew Mills had been the youngest person ever to be elected as leader of the country. That was almost ten years ago, but Mills was still holding on to the leadership. He was as popular now as he had been at that first landslide victory – more so, perhaps – despite the fact he was now absolutely, unmistakably, one hundred percent mad.

It hadn't happened overnight, of course. These things rarely do. Instead, he'd kind of slowly slipped his way into insanity over the course of about a year.

The decline had started when his wife ran away with the leader of the opposition. Those people who are paid to know about such things were certain it spelled the end of the PM's political career. After all, if you can't keep your own wife happy, what chance do you have of pleasing an entire country?

As it turned out, that couldn't have been further from the reality. The nation rallied behind the Prime Minister, and he found his popularity soaring. In the eyes of the voters, he could do no wrong, and at the next election he romped to victory with a previously unheard of ninety-five percent margin.

For a few weeks following the election, everything was fine. By the end of the first month of his second term, however, it was obvious to those close to Mr Mills that things were not quite right.

It began with the moustache. Now, even the Defence Secretary would admit that there was nothing unusual whatsoever about a man growing a moustache. He himself had experimented with some upper lip hair in his Oxford days, but had shaved it off after someone pointed out it made him look like a Middle Eastern dictator. Despite this, he still believed there to be nothing wrong with the idea of moustaches, and if the Prime Minister wanted to grown one, then so be it.

Only the Prime Minister didn't *grow* a moustache. He bought one. It was a long, thing, droopy number, which reached down to his chest and curled slightly outwards at the ends. He'd spotted one similar on an old Japanese television show and decided there and then that he wanted one. Rather than spend years growing and grooming his facial hair into the right shape and length, however, he simply bought one off an internet auction site and superglued it to his face, just below his nose.

During cabinet meetings he would sit twirling it around his finger, paying scant attention to anything anyone said to him. At Prime Minister's Questions, he'd startle onlookers by responding to trickier questions with a bellowed "Ah so!", convinced it made him sound like an enlightened Japanese scholar.

Less than a week after getting the moustache, the PM had taken to dressing in silk robes and wearing a shiny gold cymbal on his head. The whole of Number 10 Downing Street began to smell of raw fish and boiled rice. Once, while on an official

visit to Buckingham Palace, he roundhouse kicked the Duchess of Kent through a downstairs window. Fortunately, it was widely agreed she had it coming, and so no-one seemed to mind all that much.

It became obvious to members of the cabinet that the Prime Minister was trying to fill the space in his life where Mrs Mills had previously been. Considering the alternatives – alcohol, drugs, stamp collecting – an obsession with the Far East seemed harmless enough.

However, when a meeting with his irate Japanese counterpart – who was horrified by the outrageous stereotyping of his proud nation's people – almost triggered World War III, Mr Mills agreed to tone things down a bit. Off came the robes, the cymbal and – reluctantly – the droopy 'tache. Of course, he still held a fascination for all things Japanese, he just didn't go about shouting it quite as loudly these days.

The Defence Secretary paused outside another door and adjusted his tie. He wasn't in much of a mood for the PM's unique brand of madness, but he had a job to do. Even though he had plans to overthrow the lunatic and take control of the party, Robin Newton was nothing if not professional.

"Come in, Mr Newton," crackled a voice from nowhere, as Robin raised his hand to knock. "I've been expecting you."

The door swung inwards, revealing an expansive cave. Or rather, revealing a tiny, illuminated portion of an otherwise darkened cave. Robin often wondered how far the bunker stretched beyond the small pool of light just inside the doorway. He managed to resist, as he'd resisted so many times before, to shout at the top of his voice and listen to how far the echo travelled.

A high backed leather chair gave a creak as it rotated round to face him. The Prime Minister raised an eyebrow as he spun slowly into view. The suit he wore was dark and sombre, with a faint pin-stripe. It sat uneasily on him, unlike the crisp,

perfectly tailored outfit the Defence Secretary wore. Robin's expression barely flickered as he realised the PM had rounded off his three piece suit with a pair of round, furry slippers, shaped like twin sumo wrestlers.

"Important news, Prime Minister," announced Robin, not one to beat around the bush.

"That much I guessed," Matthew nodded. "We hardly use the underground entrance for social visits, after all."

"Our chaps at the Ministry of Defence thought you should see this right away." By the time he had finished the sentence, Robin had produced a thin cardboard folder from somewhere within his suit jacket. He held it out before the Prime Minister, waiting for him to take it. "It's ... something unexpected," he added, cryptically.

"One question before I look at this," said Matthew. He seemed agitated. Excited, even.

"Yes, Prime Minister?"

"Is it Godzilla?"

Robin stared at his superior and blinked. For a long time he said nothing. The Defence Secretary was used to the PM's quirks, but this question had taken even him by surprise.

"Is what Godzilla?"

"This emergency. Whatever the boys at the M.O.D. have found." Matthew nodded at the outstretched folder, but otherwise made no movement towards it. "Is it Godzilla?"

"Um ... No, Prime Minister. It isn't." Robin pushed the folder a little closer. "If you'd care to take a look, you'll see that--"

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Am I absolute sure ... ?"

"That it's not Godzilla."

"Absolutely certain," Robin nodded, determined he was going to steer the subject away from giant Japanese monsters. "We're tracking an unidentified flying object within our solar system, which--"

"Godzilla can fly," said the Prime Minister, hurriedly.

"No he can't," Robin snapped, failing to hide his irritation. "Godzilla's a lizard. Lizard's don't fly."

"What about dragons? Dragons are lizards. Are you telling me, Mr Newton, that dragons can't fly?"

"Well, obviously dragons can fly, I'm not saying ..." Robin let the sentence trail off. He was rapidly losing his slender grasp on the conversation. "Dragons aren't real!" he protested. "And neither's Godzilla, for that matter!"

"So ... What are you saying?"

"So it's not Godzilla! Nothing I'm about to show you is in any way connected to Japanese monster movies."

"Right," the PM nodded. He sagged in his chair, slightly deflated, and took the folder from Robin. He studied a sheet of glossy paper, on which was printed a blurry green image. He turned it in every direction, but still didn't have the faintest idea what it was supposed to be. "What am I looking at?"

"M.O.D. believes it's a spacecraft. Of extra-terrestrial origin," explained Robin. "It was approaching Mars when the sensors picked it up. Moving faster than anything we've ever seen."

"Do we have any idea who's flying it?" Matthew asked, his eyes fixed firmly on the page. The slight tremble in his hand was the only outward sign that he wasn't as calm as he was trying to appear.

"We don't know."

"No idea at all?"

"None whatsoever, I'm afraid. That scanner output is all we have."

"I see." The Prime Minister placed the printout back in the folder, which he then sat on the desk behind him. "So what you're saying," he mused, "is that the occupant of that ship *could*, in fact, be Godzilla."

The Defence Secretary opened his mouth to speak, but for the first time in living memory he found himself completely speechless.

"Theoretically," the Prime Minister added.

"Okay, yes," Robin scowled. "Fine. *Theoretically* the alien spacecraft headed our way could be piloted by an enormous – and entirely fictional – mutant lizard from the 1960s."

"I knew it!" the PM beamed. After a moment, though, his face fell as the significance of what the Defence Secretary had said filtered through. "What do you mean 'headed our way'? I thought you said it was headed to Mars."

"It was," said Robin, nodding gravely. "But it isn't any more."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Holly watched on in amazement as Stan's cronies darted from the bathroom, dragging their unconscious leader behind them along the corridor. A faint groan escaped Stan's lips, but otherwise the bully was silent and unmoving.

"What did you do?" she gasped, as Johnny emerged from the boys' toilets. A bone dry Jack strutted along by his side, grinning broadly. Though Johnny's expression was still one of surprise, and though his eyes were still wide open and staring, their eerie cosmic glow was now nowhere to be seen.

"What did he do?" Jack echoed, bouncing excitedly from foot to foot. "Laid out Stan Hitchen with a solitary punch, that's what he did!"

"You *hit* him?" Holly asked, aghast. Her hands were on her hips again, which was never a good sign.

"Er, I guess so," Johnny nodded, still bewildered by what had just taken place in the bathroom.

"I can't believe you hit him!" Holly disapproved. Her hand became a blur as she slapped Johnny hard across the arm. "Violence doesn't solve anything!"

"It solved me getting my head flushed down the toilet," Jack offered, happily. "Good old violence, I say!"

"You're the one who told me to go in and save him!" protested Johnny, clutching his stinging forearm.

"I meant to go in and talk them out of it, not beat them up!"

"But--"

"I expected more from you, Johnny Weeyerd," Holly harrumphed. She shook her head, then turned and stormed off towards the exit. "I'm going to have to give our relationship a lot of serious thought after this."

Johnny watched her stamp along the corridor, shoving all those unfortunate enough to be in front of her out of the way. He worried, for a moment, about how he could make it up to her, before a realisation hit him.

"We're not having a relationship!" he called after her, as she stormed away, unheeding. "I dumped you, remember?"

Jack stretched up, laid a reassuring arm across Johnny's shoulders, and gave him a friendly squeeze.

"Don't fret too much," he advised. "Okay, so she's disappointed by the way you behaved, but it'll pass. Trust me, women always come around eventually."

Johnny looked down at his brother's eager, comforting face as it winked up at him in a theatrical gesture of reassurance.

"Shut up, Jack," he groaned. He shrugged off the younger boy's arm and made for the door. "Let's go home."

#

"So, how was school?" Mrs. Weeyerd asked, as she took her place at the dinner table between Johnny and her husband. Mr. Weeyerd's eyes sparkled with excitement as he hungrily tucked into the first of his four fish fingers.

"It was remarkable," Jack began in earnest, "absolutely remark-- Ow!" A kick below the table instantly silenced him.

"Oh?" Mrs. Weeyerd enquired. Her eyes flicked between her two children as she popped a ketchup coated chip into her mouth. "How so?"

"Just Mrs. Matheson leaving, that's all," Johnny lied, hurriedly. "It was her last day today."

"Aww, that's a shame," Mrs. Weeyerd chewed. "How long's that she's been there now, Harry?"

"Hmm," pondered Mr. Weeyerd. "Must be, what ... ?"

"Sixteen years, apparently," Johnny told them.

"Must be about sixteen years, yeah," nodded his dad, as he dunked a second fish finger into the runny yellow yolk of his fried egg. "Must be about that."

"Anyway, your dad's got some good news," Mrs. Weeyerd trilled, barely able to contain her excitement. "Haven't you, dear?"

Mr. Weeyerd slowly and deliberately set his cutlery down on the table and dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

"Yes I do," he confirmed. "Yes I do." He paused to make sure his sons were both listening before he continued. "Solo Socks is on the up!"

#

For those reading who didn't spot the newspaper article, get handed the flyer, or see the late night cable TV adverts, *Solo Socks* was a company, run by Mr. Weeyerd, which went door to door selling single socks.

One day, having spent almost sixteen solid hours pondering the age-old question of where missing socks go, Mr. Weeyerd realised there was a gap in the

market waiting to be filled – a gap in the market shaped *exactly* like an odd sock. That very night, he rummaged through every drawer, cupboard and linen basket in the house until he'd assembled over a dozen incomplete pairs of knitted under-shoe footwear.

Just a few days later, *Solo Socks* was born, and Mr. Weeyerd heroically set out on his bold mission to match up the world's odd socks, and hopefully make his fortune in the process.

#

"Three! Isn't that wonderful?" Mrs. Weeyerd chirped, clapping her hands together in delight.

"Three," repeated Johnny, flatly. "You sold three socks?"

"I know, I know," Dad grinned. "I could hardly believe it myself!"

"So," Jack began, "that brings the total net earnings to date of Solo Socks Limited to ...?"

"One pound fifty!" Mr. Weeyerd replied, punching the air in triumph. Johnny and Jack rolled their eyes in unison as their parents whooped in delight and exchanged a celebratory High Five.

"Yeah," began Johnny, trying to be as diplomatic as possible. "It's not exactly a fortune though, is it?"

"Well, no," Mr. Weeyerd conceded. "But it's a terrific start."

"Hmm," Jack mused. "Define 'terrific'."

"Oh don't be so negative, your father's doing brilliantly," Mrs. Weeyerd scolded. She took a deep breath and gave her husband a slightly worried glance. He smiled at her, supportively. "Although we *are* going to have to tighten our belts a little."

"How do you mean?" Johnny pressed.

"Oh, you know," his mum replied. "Cut down on the number of holidays and treats, buy the supermarket's saver food range ..."

"Is that why my fish finger has an eye in it?" Jack interrupted.

"Rent out Jack's room," Mrs. Weeyerd continued, quickly. "Nothing too major."

"WHAT?!" Jack spluttered, spitting out a mouthful of budget fish stick, eyeball included. "Tell me you didn't just say what I think you said?"

"It'll only be for a while," Mr. Weeyerd assured. "Just until the company takes off properly."

"But," Johnny began, fearing he already knew the answer to the question he was about to ask, "where's Jack going to sleep?"

#

For the second time that day, *The Annoyer* touched down on a potentially hostile alien world. With a wobble, the vessel came to a rest high up on the roof of the school building.

On board, Krygor studied his instrument readings with growing excitement. Unlike his fellow Galaagians, an unfortunate and entirely unique medical condition meant Krygor was unable to survive in the choking atmospheres of other planets – including Galaag Six itself - without the use of an airtight space suit. According to all scans, however, he had just landed on the first planet he'd ever encountered whose atmosphere wouldn't instantly cause his lungs to explode and his eyes to burst open and drip down his face.

Still, better to be safe than sorry, he thought, and so, erring on the side of caution, he took a deep breath before sliding open the ship's exit hatch and popping his head outside.

Once he was reasonably confident his eyes were staying firmly where they were, Krygor risked a quick inhale, and waited to see if his lungs would burst open in his chest. To his great delight, they didn't, and he allowed himself a large gulp of the

freshest air he had ever tasted in his life. The pureness of it made his heart race and his head go light.

Thrilled beyond belief at being able to finally leave the confines of the ship without the need for his bulky space suit, Krygor threw his arms in the air and jumped joyously out through the hatch of *The Annoyer*.

Then plummeted forty feet to the ground.

#

"Ugh, when did you last wash your feet?" Jack choked, turning his face away from Johnny's toes, which protruded from the covers right next to his head.

"This morning!" Johnny protested from the other end of the cramped single bed. With a grunt, he hauled the duvet over to his side.

"What in?" Jack snapped, grabbing the other end of the duvet and tucking it tightly under his chin to prevent his brother stealing it all. "*Vomit?*"

"I don't know what you're moaning about," Johnny snapped back. "You've finally got my room like you always wanted."

"Yes, well, forgive me for saying, but it's lost some of its charm with you in it!"

"Shut up and go to sleep."

"You shut up and go to sleep."

"I'm trying, but you won't shut up!"

"Oh, *you* shut up."

"Both of you shut up!" bellowed Mr. Weeyerd from the bedroom next door.

"That was your fault," Jack hissed, quietly.

"Oh shut up."

And so it continued, long into the night, until finally – just a few short hours before the sun rose in the sky – both brothers slipped silently off to sleep.

#

In the beginning was The Word, and The Word was ... Well, The Word was completely unpronounceable in our human tongue, actually. Imagine the sound of a whale sneezing, though, and you wouldn't be all that far off.

A short time after The Word there was a bang – a bang so big, in fact, that people would still be talking about it several thousand million years later, despite not actually having been around to hear it. The only thing which *had* been around to hear the bang and see the universe it had formed was The Word, and The Word, quite frankly, wasn't talking.

The infant universe grew by the day, and soon the first stars and planets began to form. In just a few short million years or so, the first life began to develop on some of these planets. Curious about these developing life forms, The Word spread, rippling off in every direction at the same time to explore the infinite reaches of space.

A few seconds later, having explored the entire universe from top to bottom, The Word reformed, and set off at a more leisurely pace to take a second look. And so it came, that in the thousands of millennia which followed, The Word became all things to all beings, adapting and shaping itself to each species' strongest desire. Neither good, nor evil, The Word simply *was*, although try telling that to the alien races who encountered it on its travels.

To the peace-loving citizens of the Hthur System it was the legendary "Joy Bringer", capable of bringing absolute harmony and tranquillity to all those who gazed upon its beauty.

On the construction world of D'Gar, rumours told of an object capable of building a hundred new planets in the blink of an eye. This object, according to the High Council of Foremen, was the "Ultimate Creator", and while all believed in its existence, none had ever seen it for themselves.

On the warrior world of Galaag One – and subsequently on the hastily constructed replacement worlds of Galaag Two, Three, Four, Five and Six – they spoke of an object powerful enough to rip apart the very fabric of the universe itself. An object which, if in their possession, would mean none would dare oppose their unstoppable armies.

The Cosmic Annihilator.

For thousands of years, the Galaagians researched and tracked the movements of The Word, planning for the day they could capture it and harness its power. When that day eventually came, The Word fled, delighting in the thrill of the chase as it sought out a nearby world on which to hide.

Arriving at a suitable planet, The Word scanned for the most powerful desire in the area and adjusted its form accordingly. Had it been capable of actual speech in this new form, The Word would almost certainly have said: "They'll never find me here," as a hand picked it up, and crammed it hungrily into a waiting mouth.

#

With a gasp, Johnny jumped awake, his pyjamas soaked with sweat. He considered waking Jack up, but imagined the conversation which might follow and so quickly thought better of it. It was a dream, he thought, as his heart crashed loudly in his chest. Just a dream.

In the darkness, he closed his eyes and tried to forget the bizarre vision he'd just had. He tried to forget it, but failed, and the monstrous image of being bitten in half by his own gigantic teeth burned brightly in his mind.

## CHAPTER SIX

“What do you mean, you’ve lost it?”

The Secretary of State for Defence winced and repeated the key points of his previous statement. There weren’t many, so it didn’t take long.

“We were tracking it over the North West,’ Robin explained. “But then it disappeared.”

“Disappeared? Just like that?”

“Yes, Prime Minister. It just vanished off our screens.”

Matthew Mills got to his feet and slowly began to pace around the kitchen of Number 10. He’d been microwaving breakfast when Robin Newton had been ushered in through the front door. The Defence Secretary had insisted there was no time for the secret entrance, and while the Prime Minister disagreed, there were more important matters to discuss.

“So what you’re saying, Robin – and correct me if I’m wrong here - is that an extra-terrestrial spacecraft has entered Earth’s atmosphere somewhere above

England, and now you don't know where it is." The Prime Minister popped open the door to the microwave and gave his curry a stir. "Is that about the size of it?"

"Yes, Prime Minister," the Defence Secretary said, nodding curtly. He was being made to feel like a fool, and that was something he didn't appreciate one little bit. "We believe it either crashed, or activated some kind of advanced cloaking device."

"It didn't crash," Mills frowned. "We'd have heard about it." He gave a sharp yelp of pain as the plastic tray of his ready meal scorched his fingertips. He barely had time to carry the curry to the table before his fingers instinctively let go of the red-hot container. "Want some?" he asked, nodding towards the bright orange ooze. "It's Katsu-karē. Curried pork. From Japan. There's plenty."

Someone would have had to be looking very closely to have seen the corners of Robin's nostrils flare upwards in disgust. Japanese curry. The breakfast of a madman.

"I've already eaten," the Defence Secretary replied. He tried to resist making the next jibe, but failed: "My wife made me a full English before I left the house. Such a devoted woman."

The Prime Minister nodded and gazed down into his pork, hiding the tears which had sprung up at the corners of his eyes. Robin barely managed to disguise his own smirk.

"Right," Matthew nodded. "Jolly good." He pushed his food around inside the plastic tub, suddenly no longer hungry. "So, Robin," he began, at last, "what do you suggest we do?"

"We have a squadron of F35s on standby," the Defence Secretary told him. "I suggest we have them do a sweep of the North East and see if they pick anything up. If there's anything there, they'll find it."

"Very good," the PM sighed. He was thinking less and less about the UFO now, and more and more about how empty everything felt without his wife around. He felt like there was something missing. Like he was no longer complete. Like ... Oh, what did it matter. He was alone, it was as simple as that. "Let me know what they find," he said, and then – leaving his breakfast untouched – he headed back to bed.

#

"Finally!" Mrs. Weeyerd exclaimed, watching Johnny shuffle into the kitchen and sag down into his seat. "I've only been shouting for the past ten minutes. Where's Jack?"

"Dunno," Johnny shrugged, as his mum sat a plate of cereal down in front of him. He gazed down at the bowl through sleep-crusting eyes, then rubbed the solidified green gunk away with the back of his hand and looked again. Nope, still the same.

"Mum," he frowned, uncertainly. "Why's there water on my cornflakes?"

"Tightening the belt, remember?" she beamed. "You'd be amazed what milk costs these days!"

"Please tell me that damp area on the sheet is sweat," Jack pleaded, as he staggered sleepily into the kitchen before Johnny had a chance to pursue the milk issue further. "Even if it isn't, please just tell me it is."

"Of course it's just sweat," Johnny snapped.

"Really just sweat," Jack pressed, as he took his own seat at the table, "or are you just saying that?"

"Really just sweat!"

"Okay, okay, I was only asking," Jack retorted, as Mrs. Weeyerd deposited his plate of cereal in front of him. "Whoops," he announced, "someone's put water on my cereal!"

"Economy drive," Johnny told him, as he swirled the unappetising cereal sludge around in his own bowl. "You'd be amazed what milk costs these days."

"Oh look," remarked Jack, "they even turn the *water* chocolatey!" He pondered this for a few moments. "I can't believe I'm saying that like it's a good thing."

"It's only for a little while," Mrs. Weeyerd chirped, her fixed smile fading just a little. "We can make do, boys." Neither brother could fail to notice the pleading look in their mum's eyes, or the edge of sorrow in her voice. "Can't we?"

"I've always thought milk was overrated anyway," Johnny reasoned, trying not to flinch as he spooned a helping of the soggy gunk into his mouth. "Mmm," he lied, "delicious!"

"Well speak for yourself," Jack announced, pushing the bowl away. "I'll just have some toast instead."

"Sorry, sweetheart, there's no bread," Mrs. Weeyerd apologised. "I could always warm you up a Rivita," she offered, eagerly.

"On second thoughts," Jack decided, pulling his plate towards him again, "I'd rather have a bowl of Coco Pops." He gazed down at his cereal. It floated lazily atop a sea of murky brown water. "Although admittedly only just."

#

The streets passed slowly as Johnny and Jack sauntered their way to school. As soon as they'd finished breakfast they'd been ushered up to get dressed, and then shooed out the door before the first of the potential lodgers had arrived to view the newly appointed spare room.

Johnny was relieved to be out of the house. His mum's strained attempts at appearing positive had started to worry him. He was well aware they were going through some money problems, but something told him things might be worse than anyone was letting on. Today they'd even been given packed lunches instead of their

usual lunch money. Neither boy had dared look inside the brown paper bags Mrs. Weeyerd had handed them as they hurried out the door, deciding that some things were better left a—

“Surprise!”

The brothers stopped dead in their tracks as a scowling Stan stepped from an alleyway and blocked their path. The bully looked angry, and while this in itself was nothing out of the ordinary, the expression on his face suggested he was even angrier than usual. Considering that on any normal day Stan was generally very angry indeed, this did not bode well.

“S-Stan,” Johnny stammered, trying not to pay too much attention to the look of sheer hatred in the bigger boy’s eyes. “What brings you down this way?”

“Oh, I dunno,” Stan seethed. “Maybe a little something called,” he leaned in so his nose was almost touching Johnny’s, “revenge!”

Johnny gulped. “Revenge?”

“For that lucky punch,” Stan replied. His brow furrowed as he struggled to remember the events in the bathroom. “Or whatever it was you did to me.”

“Lucky punch?” Jack scoffed. “Don’t delude yourself, Stanny Boy, he almost knocked you through the wall!”

“Shut up, Jack,” his brother hissed.

“What’s more, he could do it again!”

“Jack, what are you saying?” Johnny demanded, unable to hide his rising panic.

“Is that a fact?” Stan growled, his voice low and menacing.

“No!” replied Johnny, squirming below the bully’s stare. “No, it’s not!”

“It is,” Jack nodded, supremely confident in his brother’s ability to cut Stan down to size. “An irrefutable, incontestable fact, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

"Well maybe we should put it to the test," Stan suggested, his eyes still locked on Johnny's. "What do you say?"

"Any time, any place, any where," Jack answered on his brother's behalf.

"Shut up!" Johnny pleaded, as droplets of sweat began to form on his forehead.

"After school, then," Stan grimaced. "At my dad's yard."

"Look, can't we talk about this?" Johnny smiled, weakly.

"You'd better be there," the bully warned, ignoring Johnny's request.

"Oh we'll be there," Jack said, folding his arms defiantly before him. "Don't you worry about that."

"You'd better," Stan repeated. He leaned back, allowing Johnny room to breathe. "Otherwise I'll be coming after you." He glared pointedly down at Jack. "Both of you!"

When Stan had stomped off in the direction of the school, Johnny wheeled round to face his younger brother.

"What did you say that for?!" he demanded.

"What did I say what for?"

"Everything!" Johnny wailed. "All of it! You've just sentenced me to death!" The expression on Stan's face flashed before his eyes again. "And probably a really painful one at that!"

"Nonsense," Jack dismissed, brushing away his brother's concerns with a wave of his hand. "You knocked him out with one punch, remember?"

"No I didn't!"

Jack looked up at his brother, puzzled. "Yes, you did. I was there."

"I didn't," Johnny insisted. "I didn't touch him! One minute he was holding me by the back of the neck, the next he was across the other side of the room! I didn't lay a finger on him!"

“Well he didn’t just throw *himself* ten feet through the air,” Jack argued. “So if you didn’t do it, who did?”

Vivid memories of the strangest dream he’d ever had rushed to the forefront of Johnny’s mind, as he and his brother started to wander once again towards the school.

“Well now,” he began, not certain even he believed what he was about to say, “it’s funny you should ask that ...”

#

Neither of the brothers had spoken for almost four minutes by the time they reached the school gates. Each was deep in thought. Jack had been silently wondering what to make of Johnny’s story, while at the same time Johnny had been wondering more or less the same thing.

“So,” Jack began, taking a deep breath, “let me get this straight. The mysterious hot dog you consumed yesterday was not, in fact, a hot dog at all. Instead, it was an unfeasibly powerful alien entity which has existed in one form or another since the dawn of time, spending vast millennia traversing the far reaches of space until finally – and somewhat surprisingly – electing to end it all by turning itself into your lunch in an attempt to get you to eat it, which you then did.” He ran over the story again in his head, making sure he hadn’t missed any of it out. “Is that about the size of it?”

“Yep,” Johnny nodded, despite the fact the whole story sounded utterly unbelievable even to him.

“And what about the purple one, where did that come from?”

“The canteen,” Johnny answered.

“Our canteen?” asked Jack, trying hard to stop himself laughing. “Or a canteen in a magical, far away land run by wee little people with tiny wings who spend all day flying--”

"Our canteen," Johnny snapped.

"Just checking."

"So, do you think I'm going crazy or what?"

"Hmm, depends," Jack mused, stroking his chin, thoughtfully. "If I say yes will you murder me and wear my head as a hat?"

"No!"

"Of course you're not going crazy," Jack reassured. "You had a particularly vivid dream, that's all. It's nothing to worry about."

"Hey, what's happening?" Holly asked, as she joined the brothers at the school gate.

"Johnny's gone mental," Jack announced. "He thinks hot dogs come from outer space."

"Not *all* hot dogs," Johnny protested. "Just ... just ..." he caught the perplexed expression on Holly's face and thought it best not to go any further. "What's in the bag?" he asked, changing the subject.

On Holly's back was quite possibly the largest rucksack that had ever been made. Wider and taller than the girl who carried it, and stuffed almost to the point of bursting, the rucksack had the effect of making Holly look like a giant turtle walking on its back legs.

"What bag?" she asked, still trying to forget the strange hot dog comment. "Oh, you mean this one?"

"Yes," Johnny confirmed, jumping in quickly before Jack could launch into a sarcastic reply.

"My make-up and costume," she replied. "You know - for tonight?"

"Tonight?" Johnny repeated, uncertainly.

"The Masked Summer Ball," Holly sighed. "Big fancy dress party? Here in the school?"

Johnny looked at her, blankly. "I didn't hear anything about it."

"Hello!" Holly shrieked. "Yes you did! It's been planned for months. Fourth largest social event of the school calendar. You're taking me, remember?"

"Hello!" Johnny mimicked. "Not your boyfriend any more, remember?"

"Haha, very good," Holly glared, not actually laughing. "You'll meet me in the hall at seven like we arranged, okay?"

"But I--"

"Okay?" she repeated, menacingly.

"Oh, he'll be there," Jack smiled.

"Will you *please* stop doing that?" Johnny cried, turning angrily to his younger brother. Holly shook her head and decided to leave them to their bickering. Neither boy noticed as she struggled slowly off through the school gates, almost bent double by the weight of her rucksack.

"What?" Jack protested. "I'm only trying to help!"

"Well don't!" Johnny shrieked. "So far this morning you've *helped* set me up for a fight with a borderline psychopath and a date with ... well, I want to say borderline psychopath again, actually, but she might hear me."

"Okay, fine, I won't," Jack conceded, holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "You're so tetchy this morning, what's gotten into you?"

"An alien hot dog!"

"Oh come on," Jack sighed. "Much as I'd love you to be right, the fact of the matter is that in hundreds of years of searching there has been absolutely no concrete evidence whatsoever to even so much as suggest the existence of--"

A shimmering light filled Jack's vision, blinding him for a few moments and cutting his sentence short.

When the light faded and his vision came back, Jack found himself standing next to Johnny on what looked like the set of a big budget science fiction movie.

Lights blinked on every wall; computer monitors flashed up cryptic symbols; and at the back of the room a set of double doors opened with a quiet, vaguely threatening *ssssshht*.

"Aliens," Jack finished, flatly, as the largest man either of them had ever seen stepped onto the deck of the third most feared battle cruiser in the universe.

"Where is it?" Krygor the Evil demanded, impatiently. "Where is The Cosmic Annihilator?"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

There were many aspects to Salak the Eviller which contributed to him being so utterly, wholly, and absolutely terrifying. If you wanted to be superficial about it, then you might say his razor-sharp claws and teeth, his four beady eyes, or his leathery green skin were what made him frightening. Look below the surface, however, and you'd realise that Salak wasn't *just* an eight-foot-tall ferocious alien warrior, and that he was, in fact, an eight-foot-tall ferocious alien warrior who really, *really* wanted to kill everyone he'd ever met. The phrase "do not judge a book by its cover" was not one which applied in this instance.

Ask any of the minions on board *The Destruktor* what the most frightening thing about Salak was, though, and they probably wouldn't mention his claws, teeth, eyes, skin, size, or ferociousness. This was partly because they were always trying to push the image of these things from their minds, but mostly because there was something else about Salak which alarmed them even more.

It wasn't the energy blasts he fired from his fingertips. It wasn't the thick, powerful tail he sometimes strangled his underlings with, for no real reason

whatsoever. It wasn't even the all-consuming rage which would sometimes grasp him, during which dozens of helpless minions would usually wind up dead. No, the thing which Salak's subordinates found most disturbing was the fact that Salak never, ever slept.

Hour after hour, day after day he would sit in his chair, unmoving, as he stared at the enormous view screen which filled one wall of the battle cruiser's bridge. Although every other Galaagian - in common with more or less every other life form in the universe - slept for at least a few hours a day, Salak was the exception, having never slept a wink since birth. No-one had ever managed to figure out why, largely because no-one had ever dared ask, but some suspected that Salak's inability to sleep was a direct result of his violent, unhinged nature. Others believed the lack of sleep was precisely what caused Salak's aggressive tendencies - which were brutal even by Galaagian standard. Whatever the reason, the alien never closed his eyes for more than a second or two at a time, and it creeped the minions out something terrible.

This was why Salak was wide awake when, with a bleep, the large display screen on board *The Destruktor* switched from showing the vast expanses of space to showing the vast expanses of an unspeakably hideous face. The minions on the command deck averted their gaze, unable to look upon the face of The Evillest without risking spontaneous combustion.

"Evillest," Salak breathed, rising from his chair and kneeling before the screen. "To what do I owe this most unexpected honour?"

"Oooh, hello love!" The Evillest waved. "You won't believe the palaver me an' your father have had getting this video thing going. Been a nightmare, hasn't it, Brian?"

"A nightmare," agreed a voice from somewhere off screen.

"Absolute ruddy nightmare!" On screen, The Evillest squinted. Salak watched as she licked her thumb and rubbed it against the camera lens. "There's a dirty mark on the screen, right on your ..." she began, before the truth dawned on her. "No, it *is* on your face!" she exclaimed. "Have you been eating them minions again?"

Salak mumbled something under his breath.

"Sorry?" The Evillest urged. "I didn't catch that."

"Just a couple," Salak repeated, louder this time.

"Oooh, them poor little blighters! Brian, he's been eating them minions again."

"Poor little blighters," echoed the voice from off screen.

"Poor little blighters," The Evillest agreed, shaking her head in disappointment. "Anyway, love, just thought we'd give you a ring to see how you were getting on. Has your brother had any luck yet?"

"I have received no communication from him since he left in pursuit of the Annihilator," Salak replied. "I was considering beginning my own hunt any minute now," he added, innocently.

"Oh, give him a chance," The Evillest scolded. "You know he's not as capable as you are, it's only fair to give him a bit of a head start."

"As you wish, Evillest," Salak bowed.

"I do wish you'd call me mum," she sighed. "Anyway," she brightened, "better be off. I've got a stack of ironing and it isn't going to do itself!"

"Very well, Evill-- Mother."

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" The Evillest beamed. "Oh, whereabouts was your brother when you last heard from him anyway? So your father can put one of them little flags in the map. You know what he's like with his little flags."

"Eight parsecs from the Rigerian System," Salak answered. "Headed in the direction of a largely insignificant planet in the Milky Way galaxy."

"Which planet?" The Evillest asked, her eyes narrowing, suspiciously.

"I believe they call it 'Earth'."

"WHAT?" she bellowed, in a voice loud enough to shake the ship and cause two minions' heads to implode. "HE'S GOING TO EARTH?!"

"That was the projected route of The Cosmic Annihilator, yes," Salak gulped, wilting under his mother's furious stare. "Is there a problem?"

"Follow him!" The Evillest demanded. "Find him and take him home! He must not interact with any of the Earthlings!"

"But ... why?"

"Don't ask questions," The Evillest seethed. "Just do what you're told and Mummy won't have to use her Big Voice. You don't like it when Mummy uses her Big Voice, do you?"

"N-no," Salak stammered.

"Well then," she smiled, patting her ruffled apron back down, and adjusting her greying hair, "go get him and bring him home. And remember," she reiterated, "do *not* under any circumstances let him interact with the Earthlings!"

"And if he already has?"

"Then seize him and destroy it," she glowered. "Destroy the planet Earth!"

#

Half way across the universe, Krygor was attempting without success to interact with the Earthlings he'd recently beamed on board *The Annoyer*. His scans had indicated intelligent life on the planet, but the two humans standing before him now were exhibiting little sign of it. Instead they both stood staring straight at him, their eyes wide, their mouths hanging vacantly open. It was quite disconcerting, if he was honest. He decided to try asking again, more slowly this time.

"Where," he began, rolling the words of the sentence around in his mouth as deliberately as possible, "is The Cosmic Annihilator?" The boys continued to gaze at

him, rooted to the spot in amazement and fear. "Oh this is pointless!" Krygor decided. "You can't understand a word I'm--"

"W-who are you?" Johnny croaked.

"Ah, so you do understand," Krygor grinned, triumphantly. "What do you mean who am I?" he added, his face falling. "Isn't it obvious?"

"N-not really."

"Oh, come on!" Krygor exclaimed. He turned his head sideways and gestured towards his profile. "Don't tell me you don't recognise this face!"

Johnny and Jack shook their heads in unison. Neither of them had ever seen the face, or, indeed, a person this large before. Almost seven feet tall and five feet wide, and with hands which looked like they could shatter rocks, the man who currently towered over them completely redefined their understanding of the word 'big'. Were someone to track down the world's tallest man and the world's fattest man and then eat them both, what stood before them now would almost certainly be the result. Not that the giant was fat. It was just that his hulking, muscle-bound frame was the *exact* polar opposite of thin.

"What?" he gasped, indignant. "Come on, you're not thinking. I'll give you a clue, it starts with a K."

"Kevin?" Jack offered, hopefully.

"Kevin?" Krygor wailed. "Kevin? Do I look like a Kevin?"

"I, er, I don't know any Kevins," Jack admitted.

"Uncle Kevin," Johnny reminded him.

"Oh yeah, Uncle Kevin. You definitely don't look like him, no."

"He's a midget," Johnny explained. "Mini Kev, we call him."

"Not to his face, though."

"Yeah, well we don't say anything to his face really, do we?"

"No, more the top of his head."

"Keith?" Johnny hazarded.

Krygor's gaze switched between his two captives, his expression one of absolute bewilderment. This was getting him nowhere.

"What are you talking ..." he began, then thought better of it. "I am Krygor the Evil," he informed them. "The third most evil being in all the universe, and second in line to the throne of Galaag Six."

"That would have been my next guess," Jack said, quietly.

"So now you are aware of exactly who you are dealing with I will ask you again. Where is The Cosmic Annihilator? My tracking instruments tell me that one of you has it."

"I think," Johnny swallowed, as Krygor shifted his withering stare towards him. "I think I may have eaten it."

#

On board *The Destruktor* the minions were desperately trying to unpin themselves from the back wall of the command deck, where G-Force currently had them well and truly stuck.

Up front, staring out at the stars streaking past the ship, sat Salak, his brow furrowed in concentration, his mouth fixed in a gleeful grin of satisfaction. *Finally* he was being allowed to go out and play. It had been almost a week since he'd last destroyed an entire planet. This was going to be fun.

With the laws of Physics trailing helplessly in its wake, Salak's will powered *The Destruktor* forward, covering countless thousands of miles in a fraction of the time it took for the smallest of his four alien hearts to beat. While Earth was still just a little bit under an infinite distance away, the gap was closing, and it was closing fast.

#

Krygor studied the older of his captives closely, uncertain whether this was what passed for humour on this primitive planet. The expression on the boy's face, however, didn't suggest he was joking. Perhaps he'd simply misheard.

"Sorry, you've ...?" Krygor quizzed, deliberately letting the end of the question trail off.

"Eaten it."

No, apparently he'd heard correctly after all. "You've eaten it," Krygor repeated, flatly. "You've *eaten* the most cataclysmically destructive device in the cosmos."

"He thought it was a hot dog," Jack offered, in way of an explanation. Krygor peered at them both, distrustfully.

"Is this a wind up?" he demanded, angrily.

"N-no," Johnny stammered. "It's not!"

"Because if it is you've picked the wrong person to wind up," Krygor warned.

"It's not a wind up," Johnny repeated. "I really did think it was a hot dog, and I really did eat it!" He paused for a few seconds, before adding, "sorry," almost as an afterthought.

"Oh, well that's marvellous," Krygor sighed, as he sagged down into the driver's seat of *The Annoyer*. "That's just ruddy marvellous."

Now he no longer loomed over them, the children couldn't help but notice their captor didn't seem all that frightening any more. Oh sure, he still looked like he could tear them limb from limb using just his eyebrows and a bit of determination, but there was something else about him - a melancholy sadness - which was impossible to overlook.

"Can't we just, you know, wait for nature to take its course?" Johnny suggested.

"How do you mean?" asked Krygor, prepared to clutch at the flimsiest of straws at this point.

"You know," replied Johnny, embarrassed. "Wait for it to pass through."

"I don't follow."

"In one end, out the other, sort of thing."

"Still not with you," the alien frowned.

"He means can't you wait until he excretes it!" Jack interjected, impatiently.

Krygor looked at them in horrified disbelief. "Excrete it?" he echoed, aghast. "You don't mean ...?"

"Well, can't you?" Johnny shrugged.

"No I can't," Krygor snapped, as he began to list his reasons on his fingers. "One, it's disgusting and you both should be ashamed of yourselves for even suggesting it, and two, nothing is going to 'pass through' as you so delightfully put it. You have consumed The Cosmic Annihilator, therefore you *are* The Cosmic Annihilator."

Johnny's lips moved silently as he replayed the last sentence in his head over and over again. This time it was his turn to wonder if he'd misheard what had just been said.

"I'm The Cosmic Annihilator?"

"You are it, it is you, one has absorbed the other, however you want to say it," Krygor told him, waving his hand, dismissively. "Which is all very well for you, but it leaves me with something of a problem. I'm supposed to bring back a glowing orb of absolute power, I can't very well return with a bound and gagged human, saying 'here, you're never going to believe this one', can I? I'd be a laughing stock!" An expression of sorrow flashed across his face. "Even more than I am already," he added, below his breath.

"What does this do?" Jack asked, as he traced his fingers along a control panel on the wall beside him.

"Don't touch that!" Krygor screeched, leaping to his feet. "You'll kill us all!"

Jack jumped back from the buttons like he'd been electrocuted. "What is it?" he asked, worried.

Krygor hesitated, then cleared his throat, gently. "What's what?" he asked, innocently.

"The button," Jack explained. "What does it do?"

"What, that button?"

Jack nodded.

"*That* button?" Krygor stalled. "That specific button right there?"

"Yes," Jack confirmed.

"It's the ... You know, the ..." the alien began, uncertainly, before sinking back down into his seat once more. "I've got no idea," he admitted, "but half the buttons on this thing would kill us all in one way or another, so it's probably best just to avoid touching anything."

"Where are we anyway?" Johnny asked, his fear fading a miniscule amount as he realised Krygor wasn't about to harm either of them, or at least not right away.

"You are on board *The Annoyer*, the third most feared battle cruiser in all existence, and are currently high above the human installation you call 'school'."

"What, in space?" Jack gasped.

"On the roof, actually," Krygor confessed.

"That's not that high," the younger boy shrugged, turning his attention back to the console beside him.

"You try falling off it, sunshine, then we'll talk about how high it is," Krygor winced, gingerly rubbing his back.

"If it's on the roof, how come we couldn't see it?" asked Johnny.

"Ha!" Krygor scoffed. "Your puny human minds couldn't even begin to comprehend the technology involved in keeping the ship concealed from view!"

"Is it refractive light technology?" Jack asked, excitedly. "You know, like bending the light around the ship's exterior in such a way that it appears completely transparent to the naked eye."

"Er ... yes, something like that," Krygor replied, hoping he sounded confident. He had anticipated that his planned use of the word 'invisible' would have been baffling enough for them. Beyond that, he had absolutely no idea how it all worked. It was hard enough just remembering which button to press to switch the cloaking device on. He'd had enough problems just mastering reverse parking without worrying about the more complex stuff, let alone how any of it actually operated.

"And you're an alien?" Jack quizzed.

"From Galaag Six," Krygor mumbled. "Yes."

"So how come you speak English?"

"What is this?" shrilled Krygor. "The Prinlakkian Inquisition?"

"I'm only asking," Jack protested.

Krygor almost looked apologetic for his outburst. "Intergalactic translator implanted in my brain," he explained, as he tapped the side of his skull. "I can speak and understand every language on every planet in the known universe."

"Incredible!" Jack gasped. "Even Spanish?"

"Even Spanish."

"Even German?"

"Yes, even German," Krygor nodded. "Every language."

"Even Norwegian?"

"Yes! Every language!" Krygor exclaimed. "Norwegian, German, Lower Troloxarian – every language in the known galaxy!"

"Even--"

"I have a gun," Krygor pointed out, gesturing towards the holster on his belt. "Now I'm not threatening you, I don't want to use it, I'm just saying." He peered long and hard at Jack, his eyebrows raised, expectantly, until he was certain the boy had taken the hint.

Throughout the previous conversation, a thought had been worrying Johnny, and now that the command deck had fallen into silence, it seemed like his opportunity to voice it had come.

"S-so," he fumbled, hardly daring ask the question but knowing that he must. "What happens now?" He wilted as Krygor stood up and towered above him once again. "What are you going to do with us?"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"He let you go?"

"Yep," said Johnny, taking his seat on the bench across from Holly, and sitting his brown paper lunch bag on the table between them.

"But why?" she asked, as she crunched on a carrot stick.

"Oh, you know what? I forgot to ask him," replied Johnny, sarcastically. "How should I know why he let us go? He just said we could leave as long as we swore on ... What was it again?"

Jack looked up from his schoolbag which he was busily rummaging in. "The High Chakaree," he said, as he pulled his own slightly damp looking lunch bag from within the satchel.

"He made us swear on the High Chakaree that we wouldn't tell anyone about it," Johnny explained.

"But you've told me," Holly retorted.

"Oh well, I'm sorry, but it's not like I even know what the High Chakaree is!"

"Oh, good Lord," Jack breathed, as he peered inside his paper bag. "She hasn't."

"What have you got?" asked Johnny.

"She has."

"What is it?"

"Scrambled egg," Jack groaned. "You?"

"I can't even bring myself to look," Johnny sighed.

"Swap you, whatever it is?"

"Tuck in," the older brother insisted, pushing the unopened bag along the table.

"Nice, you've got a tuna sandwich," Jack cheered. "Hey, how come I get a bag of scrambled egg and you get a tuna sandwich?"

"Maybe I'm not as irritating," Johnny reasoned. "So what you think?" he asked, turning back to Holly.

"I think your mum needs to work on her culinary skills," Holly replied.

"I thought she said there was no bread, anyway," Jack continued to whine. "How come there's no bread for my toast but there's bread for your sandwich?"

"Yeah, I meant more about us being abducted by an alien, to be honest," said Johnny, ignoring his brother's muttering.

"I think you're very funny," Holly told him, stony-faced, as she finished the last forkful of her salad. "Seriously. Hysterical. Quite the imagination." She sat her plate back on her tray, glanced at her watch, and stood up. "I have to run and help decorate the hall. Seven o'clock, remember?"

"What? But I wasn't jok--"

"Remember?" Holly scowled.

"I remember, but--"

"Good," Holly nodded, curtly, "and you better have a costume." With that, she stomped off before Johnny had a chance to say any more. He watched her go, shaking his head in dismay.

"Can you believe that?" he said.

"I know, it's incredible," Jack nodded, as he munched on a mouthful of sandwich. "I mean, scrambled egg, what was she *thinking?*"

Johnny sighed and turned his gaze up to the roof of the school, part of him hoping he might see something, part of him hoping he might not. He didn't.

"You think he's still there?" he mused.

"Dunno," Jack shrugged, spraying tiny bits of tuna out of his mouth and onto the table. "You're the one with the superpowers, you tell me."

"I don't have superpowers, shut up," Johnny dismissed.

"That's not what he said," Jack countered, as he finished the sandwich. He glanced down at his own paper bag, then up at his brother. "You going to want this scrambled egg?"

#

On board *The Annoyer*, Krygor stared out of the view screen at the town outside, and wondered what he was going to do. Below him, the Earthlings scurried around, doing whatever it was that Earthlings did. They were smaller than he'd expected, but then there was a lot about them that had come as a surprise.

In fact, if he was honest, the whole trip to Earth was proving to be something of an eye-opener. Since birth Krygor had lived inside one form of airtight device or another, whether it be his spacesuits or his spaceship, never able to breathe unaided in the atmosphere of any planet he'd visited. Never, that is, until now.

The air had felt cold and tingly on his lungs as he'd jumped out of his cruiser, and even more so when he'd laboriously dragged himself back up the outside of the

school after his fall. It was a strange, almost magical feeling, and one he didn't look forward to leaving behind.

Then, of course, there was the appearance of the Earthlings themselves. Yes, they were smaller, but other than that they looked almost exactly like him. On Galaag Six he was a deformed oddity – no tail, no claws and only two eyes. His rosy pink skin was considered grotesque by the leathery green Galaagians, but here ... Krygor trembled, barely able to bring himself to even think the words. Here he looked normal. Had his mother not been The Evillest, Krygor would almost certainly have been thrown to the Rararks at birth. Only her position as absolute ruler of Galaag Six had guaranteed his survival, and now he was about to fail her. Again.

Salak would be on his way, Krygor knew, and Salak would know exactly what to do. He'd find a way of extracting The Cosmic Annihilator from the Earthling, even if it left the Earthling as nothing more than a throbbing sack of entrails on the ground. A pang of regret shot through the alien. He ignored it, pushing it down inside. He was the third most evil being in the universe, and had the certificate to prove it. He had no time for regret. The Cosmic Annihilator must be retrieved for the glory of Galaag Six, whatever the cost. Krygor's single heart beat loudly in his chest, as those three words echoed unpleasantly in his head: "Whatever the cost".

#

Johnny shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and pulled on the back of his t-shirt to unstick it from his back. The warmth inside the classroom was almost smothering him. Outside, the sun beat down. Inside, Mr. Greaves droned on. And on. And on. Johnny was too busy trying to subtly check if his deodorant was holding up to notice Jack's hand shoot up into the air.

"Yes, boy?" Mr. Greaves asked, his words short and clipped as if he was grudging each syllable.

"You just said you're a saddle," Jack told him.

Mr. Greaves peered down his long, bony nose at him. "No I didn't, don't be ridiculous."

"Yes, you did," Jack insisted. "You said *Je suis l'ensellement* which means *I am the saddle*."

"No, boy, I didn't," Mr. Greaves scowled, as he turned his attention back to the rest of the class. "As I was--"

"You did," Jack continued. "I think you meant to say *Je suis l'enseignant* – I am the teacher – which would make sense, given the situation."

Mr. Greaves stared down at Jack, his brow furrowed in concentration. "That's what I said," he glowered. "Je suis l'ensellement."

"You did it again," Jack shrilled. "You said you are the saddle. L'enseignant," Jack spoke, slowly.

"L'enseignment," the headmaster mimicked.

"Almost," Jack encouraged. "L'enseignant."

"L'ensei ..." Mr. Greaves began, then shook his head in frustration. "Enough! I am the teacher here, not you!"

"Right," Jack mumbled, quietly. "And which one of us is the saddle?"

"I SAID THAT'S ENOUGH!" the headmaster bellowed, making all the pupils jump in their seats. "I will not tolerate backchat," he snarled, addressing not just Jack but the class at large. "I will not tolerate insubordination! And I will *not* tolerate being corrected by snivelling little brats who don't have one tenth of the knowledge I do!" His gaze moved from pupil to pupil, daring them to disagree. None of them did.

When Mr. Greaves had made sure there were to be no more challenges to his authority, he turned and began to write on the blackboard in neat, regimented handwriting too small to be seen from the back of the class.

Fortunately, the back of the class wasn't particularly bothered by this, being more concerned with throwing torn up pieces of eraser at the back of Johnny's head. Johnny turned in time for an especially large piece of rubber to *boing* off his forehead. Stan grinned back at him.

"The junkyard," he mouthed. "Be there."

#

Silently, moving as if in slow motion, a peanut sailed through the air of the State Dining Room of Number 10 Downing Street. End over end it flipped, first soaring, and then tumbling towards its final destination.

With a metallic thud, the nut landed in the waste paper bin which currently rested on the long, oak dining table. Across the room, Prime Minister Mills leapt to his feet and punched the air in triumph.

After a short but thoroughly undignified victory dance, the PM slumped back down onto an ornately carved chair and sighed. His dressing gown hung open, revealing creased and crumpled pyjamas with food stains on the front.

Had Mrs Mills been here she would never have let him play Peanut Basketball in the dining room. Nor would she have let him play Peanut Basketball anywhere else, for that matter. She hadn't let him do much, but he'd still loved her, right up to the point she'd packed her bags and left.

He caught sight of his reflection in one of the shiny silver platters which rested on the wide window sills. A pale, sunken-eyed mockery of himself stared back. What would she say if she could see him now?

"The RAF reports no sign of any spacecraft."

No, he doubted she'd say that. That wasn't like her at all. It was more like—

"Defence Secretary Newton," Mills gasped, jumping to his feet and pulling his dressing gown closed. "I wasn't informed you were here."

"Obviously," Newton nodded. The Defence Secretary stepped fully into the room and let his gaze wander up and down the shambles of a man standing before him. "You are aware, Prime Minister, that it's two in the afternoon?"

"Is it? I ... um ... doesn't time fly?" The PM felt his cheeks go red, and rushed to change the subject. "So you were saying? The RAF?"

"No sign of any spacecraft," Robin repeated. "Nothing to indicate anything out of the ordinary."

"I see. So we're back to square one."

"Not quite, Prime Minister." Robin felt himself wince, despite his best efforts not to. He had debated all the way along Downing Street on whether to reveal this next piece of information or not. In the end he'd decided against it, but now here he was, getting ready to blurt it out.

"Oh?" Matthew frowned. "How so?"

"We have an eye-witness report," the Defence Secretary said. "Although details are ... unclear."

"Someone saw it?" the PM asked, growing excited. "Someone saw the craft?"

"Not quite."

"Well?" pressed Mills, when it was clear Robin wasn't volunteering any further information. "What then?"

"It was an airline pilot. A civilian." The Defence Secretary sounded almost apologetic now. "Background reports suggest he's reliable, but there's no way for us to corroborate what he claims to have seen."

"What?" shrilled the Prime Minister. "What did he see?!"

"A hot dog," Robin sighed. "He swears he saw a hot dog flying to Earth."

#

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Johnny fretted, as he and Jack entered Hitchen's Junkyard. "How did I let you talk me into this?"

"You know he'd never stop harassing us if you didn't show up," Jack explained. "And besides, in one corner we have Stan Hitchen, beefed up Neanderthal thug with an inferiority complex, and in the other corner we have Johnny Weeyerd, a skinny, frankly ungainly beanpole possessing unlimited cosmic powers. Where's the problem?"

"Will you stop saying I've got cosmic powers?" pleaded Johnny. "And what does ungainly mean?"

"Gawky, clumsy, lumbering," Jack explained.

"Right ..."

"Awkward. Graceless. Bumbling, even."

"Yes, yes, I get it, thank you!"

"And on the cosmic power front, you did manage to launch Stan through the air yesterday with no effort on your behalf," the younger brother reminded him.

"Yeah, but nothing has happened since then, has it?"

"No, but then you haven't been in danger since then, have you?"

"What," Johnny snapped, "apart from being threatened by a giant alien, you mean?"

"He wasn't dangerous," Jack dismissed. "He seemed quite nice, in his own strange little way."

Johnny tried to argue, but couldn't. Jack was right, Krygor hadn't really been all that frightening at all, at least not once the initial shock of seeing him had passed. That didn't change the fact that there hadn't even been a flicker from The Cosmic Annihilator when he *had* believed there was danger, though, and he was quickly coming to the conclusion that emerging victorious from his encounter with Stan yesterday had been a complete and utter fluke.

"I didn't think you'd turn up," Stan shouted, as he jumped down from the smashed up shell of a minibus. His huge feet squigged down into the soggy ground as he landed before the brothers, splashing flecks of mud into their faces.

"I don't want to fight you, Stan," Johnny confessed, wiping dirt from his eye. "I hoped we could talk about it and sort it out that way."

Stan pretended to consider this for a moment, then shoved Johnny hard in the chest, sending him toppling backwards over something heavy which had appeared behind him. "Nah," Stan grinned. Johnny landed in the mud with a splat, just as Kenny, one of Stan's cronies, stood up, laughing.

"That's cheating," Jack protested, as both bullies stood over his fallen brother. "That's not fair!"

"Come on, Stan," Johnny panicked, as he struggled to get back to his feet. "Your dad might see, you'll get into trouble."

"Hurry up then, Stanny," a gravelly voice called from somewhere nearby. Johnny turned to see Stan's dad standing in the doorway of his work hut, slurping from a can of beer as he watched on. "Get into him."

"You shouldn't be encouraging this," Jack gasped, horrified. "Call yourself a role model?"

"Not really," Mr. Hitchen chuckled, as he crushed his empty can and cracked open another one. "Now hurry up, lad," he shouted to his son, "the snooker's on in a minute."

Johnny stumbled as he got to his feet, narrowly ducking under a swinging punch from Stan. He twisted and turned as the bully tried to get hold of him, managing to narrowly avoid Stan's dirty, meatslab hands as they reached out to catch him.

"Get hold of him," Stan snarled, as he and Kenny both tried to grab hold of the squirming Johnny.

"That's not fair!" Jack repeated, as he caught Kenny's arm and strained to pull him away. With a growl the bully elbowed Jack in the face, sending him crashing to the ground. Jack tried not to cry as he clutched at his burst and swelling lip.

"What did you do that for?" Johnny hissed, turning on Kenny, his face a mask of pure fury.

"What?" Kenny mumbled, surprised by the tone of Johnny's voice, and the aura of rage which suddenly surrounded him. "Um ..."

"Never touch my brother again, do you understand me?" Johnny menaced, grasping Kenny by his t-shirt. Deep down in Johnny's eyes, infinity briefly sparkled, until a crunching blow to the kidneys made him cry out with pain. Stan spun him and punched him in the stomach, winding him.

"Hold his arms," the bully demanded. Kenny wasted no time in doing what he was told and wrapped his arms around Johnny's, holding them tight.

"Get off him," Jack begged, as Stan continued to power punches into Johnny's body. "Leave him alone!"

Over at the hut, Stan's dad was enjoying the show. He cackled as his son beat on the helpless Johnny, who still valiantly struggled to break free of Kenny's grasp.

"Now this is what I call entertainment," he sniggered, as he broke open another tin of beer and took a deep gulp. Behind him, the inside of the hut illuminated briefly as a hulking shape teleported in.

"I'm afraid," Krygor scowled, as he stepped from the shadows, his massive muscles spasming with barely contained anger. "I have to disagree."

## CHAPTER NINE

With a gloopy 'schlop', Stan's dad landed face down in the mud at his son's feet, unconscious. As one, the four boys looked down at the fallen Mr. Hitchen, then up at the enormous figure which stood outside the hut, dwarfing it.

"I suggest," Krygor began, his voice low and threatening as he fixed Stan with an icy stare, "that you two take that piece of worthless trash and get out of my sight." Stan and Kenny stared at him, stunned into silence. "NOW!" Krygor boomed, in a voice loud enough to shake the very ground at their feet.

The alien's bellow kicked both bullies into life, and they quickly released Johnny. No longer supported, and his legs too weak to stand, he fell to his knees, clutching his stomach. Jack quickly rushed to his side.

"Help me with my dad, Kenny," Stan urged. He was trying without much luck to drag the sleeping Mr. Hitchen through the mud and away from the giant who'd seemed to appear from thin air.

"No chance!" Kenny wailed, running from the yard as fast as his legs would carry him. Johnny, Jack and Krygor watched on for a few minutes, as Stan pulled his

dad through sludgy puddle after sludgy puddle, until they both disappeared out through the entrance to the junkyard.

"I'm sorry for abducting you earlier, I did not realise you were children," Krygor said, when the three of them were finally alone. Johnny winced as he got back to his feet, leaning on Jack for support. "You are brothers?" The boys both nodded. Krygor stared off into space for a few moments. "You protect each other," he mused. "Even when it means putting yourself at risk."

"Of course," Johnny replied. He studied Jack's split lip, ignoring his younger brother's protests. "That's what brothers do."

"Get off," Jack hissed.

"Let me look at it."

"Look with your eyes, not your hands!"

"This is a new concept for me," Krygor spoke, sadly. "There is more to you Earthlings than meets the eye."

"Thanks," Johnny replied, uncertainly.

"Which is why I have no choice," the alien sighed. "For the good of your world, you must return with me to Galaag Six."

"What?!"

"My own brother, Salak the Eviller, is on his way here even now. He will stop at nothing to get his hands on The Cosmic Annihilator," Krygor explained. The alien's shoulders had sunk so low he appeared to have shrunk a foot in height. "If it means getting his hands on the Annihilator, he will gladly destroy you and all other life on Earth. If I beat him to it then perhaps he will leave this planet intact."

"Can't you talk him out of it?" Johnny asked, desperately. "Surely he'll listen to reason?"

"Obviously you've never met my brother," replied the alien. Reluctantly, he reached into the holster which was slung round his waist. "I'm sorry," he said, as he drew his weapon and pointed it at Johnny, "but I have no choice."

"Whoa!" Jack exclaimed. "Where did that come from?"

"It's a Norokian Barbul Blaster, the most powerful handgun in all the known galaxies."

"Um," began Jack, "I feel I should correct you there."

Krygor looked down at the object in his hand. It wasn't a Norokian Barbul Blaster. Norokian Barbul Blasters were long and angular, with three shiny barrels protruding menacingly from the front. They were nasty pieces of equipment, and they looked it.

The thing he currently grasped, on the other hand was large and furry, with two long, floppy ears poking up from its fluffy little head. It didn't look nasty, in fact, it looked quite cute. Cute, and very, very surprised.

Surprised, that is, but not nearly as surprised as Krygor.

#

The planet Earth filled almost the entire view screen of *The Destruktor* – a bright ball surrounded on all sides by shades of black. Salak studied the image of the tiny planet closely. It looked so ... so ... *gentle*. Those fluffy clouds, the vibrant blues, the lush greens – the whole thing turned his stomachs.

With but a thought the alien switched the screen back to normal magnification levels. At one, the Earth vanished somewhere among the millions of white dots which filled the vast area of space outside the ship.

Salak was still several million miles away from the planet, and the prize it contained, but at present speeds it would not take long for him to reach it.

"Soon," he sneered as the ship sliced silently through space. "Soon I will have my fun!"

#

"Okay," Krygor swallowed, looking down at the bunny like it was about to explode in his hands, "so how did you do that then?"

"I didn't!" replied Johnny. He frowned and fixed his eyes on the rabbit. It looked up at him and blinked. "I mean, I don't think I did. Did I?"

"Well I doubt he had a rabbit in his pocket a minute ago," Jack answered, then thought he'd better ask, just in case. "You didn't, did you?"

Krygor slowly shook his head, his gaze still locked on the unexplained animal. "You know, I'm pretty sure I'd have noticed." He gave a sharp shriek of shock as the bunny bounced from his grasp. It paused for a second, its nose twitching wildly, before it turned and hopped away across the yard.

"I couldn't have," Johnny mumbled. He hadn't wanted a rabbit to appear. It wasn't like he had anything against the creatures, he just didn't really give them much thought. "I can't turn guns into members of the animal kingdom. It's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible for The Cosmic Annihilator," Krygor told him. "There is nothing you can not do."

"See?" Jack chirped, nudging his brother. "Super powers!"

"Well why did it kick in now then, and not when Stan was trying to weave my face into the ground a minute ago?" Johnny coughed, his stomach still suffering the effects of the bully's blows.

"You have not yet mastered your new abilities, they are erratic and unpredictable," Krygor told him. "Nevertheless, it makes no difference. You may have turned my gun into a rabbit ..." The alien hesitated. That was a sentence he'd never expected to have to say. "But you must still come with me to Galaag Six or the Earth, and everyone on it, will be destroyed."

Johnny closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply, ignoring Jack as he began to loudly disagree with Krygor. He had tried to convince himself that nothing had changed; that he was the same as he'd always been. But there was, he had to admit, something different. Deep inside there was something ... Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Something lurking. He could deny it all he liked, but something had changed within him. He could sense it, somewhere deep down in the darkest corners of his mind, just out of reach. Waiting.

"You're not taking my brother into outer space," Jack snapped. "The very idea is preposterous."

"Look, I'm trying to help you here," protested Krygor. "I'm trying to save your planet from being obliterated. I don't have to, you know? I could just leave you to fend for yourselves."

"Well that's very courteous of you, but there's still no way you're taking Johnny back to ... wherever it was you said!"

"Am I not making myself clear, or something? I keep telling you, if I don't take him back then you can kiss this world goodbye! This time tomorrow there won't be enough of it left to make a sandcastle out of!"

"Enough," Johnny whispered. His eyes flicked open. Determination shone from deep within then. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't understand," Krygor yelled. "This planet, everyone on it, your friends, your family ... I know Salak, he will not stop until all of them are dead. He has obliterated countless worlds, and will waste no time in doing the same to this one. He lives for the thrill of the kill. He exists solely to destroy. He will come to Earth and he will wipe it out!"

"No," Johnny disagreed, his voice calm and low. "He won't."

"How long until he gets here?" Jack asked.

"A few minutes, a few hours, I don't know," shrugged Krygor.

"We could get the military," the younger boy suggested, brightly. "We could show them your ship, you know, to prove we weren't lunatics, and warn them of what's coming."

"No," Johnny said again. Jack managed to miss the strange tone in his brother's voice.

"Oh right, fine, just dismiss the boy with the genius level intellect's ideas out of hand. That's fine!" Jack sulked. "What do you suggest then? How are we going to stop him?"

"Me," his big brother replied, just a hint of uncertainty in his voice. "I'll stop him."

"You?" Jack scoffed. "Oh right, and what, may I ask, are you going to do, pull another rabbit out?"

"I'm The Cosmic Annihilator," Johnny breathed, the doubt growing as he started to wonder if what he was suggesting was utter suicide. He smiled nervously as Krygor and Jack stared at him in disbelief. "I just need a bit of time to practice, that's all."

## CHAPTER TEN

Holly stepped down off the stepladder to admire her handiwork. The last drawing pin was in place. The last piece of sticky tape was stuck. It had been a long, laborious task, but finally it was done. It was time for the moment of truth. It was time to test.

"Dim the overheads," she commanded, loudly. Somewhere, someone listened and obeyed, and the main lights of the cavernous gym hall faded to blackness. With her fingers crossed, she flicked the switch on the power socket on the wall.

Holly gasped. Along the walls, from ceiling to floor, thousands upon thousand of tiny pinpricks of light twinkled, like distant stars in an endless night sky. She had excelled herself this time. There was no doubt about it – she was the Queen of the Fairy Light. Tonight was going to be absolutely perfect. Under her ruthlessly efficient leadership, the fourth biggest social event of the school year was about to become the biggest social event of the decade.

"I've counted the party poppers," whimpered a Sixth Form girl as she approached Holly, a small cardboard box clutched in her hands. "They're all there."

"Excellent," Holly said, barely listening. "Can you count them again for me?"

"But I've already counted them twice!"

Holly turned and folded her arms as she looked disapprovingly up at the other girl. "Count them again," she demanded.

The girl opened her mouth as if to speak, then reconsidered. She sighed as she shuffled off to recount the party poppers. Again.

"Right," Holly clapped, taking her list of things to do from her back pocket. "What's next?"

She knew the older girls probably meant well, but unless she did everything herself there was no way she could be sure it had all been done properly. Ever since she'd overthrown the previous head of the Masked Summer Ball organising committee and taken charge, it had been her job to give the helpers instruction, and so she made sure each task she assigned them was as repetitive, time-consuming, and pointless as possible, so as to leave her free to get on with the serious work.

You might say, in fact, that if the Masked Summer Ball was an intergalactic battle cruiser, it was one which was powered and controlled entirely by the unbreakable will of Holly Masters.

Holly glanced at her watch and her heart skipped a beat. One hour to go! She glanced around the room. The décor was ready. The music system had been tested and tested again. The food would be here any second. It was all coming together. Tonight was going to be a very good night.

#

Minions rained down on the command deck floor, landing with a series of painful thuds as *The Destruktor* slowed to somewhere below the speed of light, and G-Force stopped pinning them to the wall.

Salak leaned forward in his chair and studied the Earth, which slowly grew larger on his view screen. This time the planet was not magnified. *The Destruktor* had arrived.

"And now," Salak hissed, as a scanning device beeped into life next to him, "let us find the Annihilator."

"W-would you like us to do something, Lord Salak?" the bravest of the minions gulped, as he approached the command chair. Behind him, his colleagues huddled together, watching nervously. "Press some buttons? Look busy, maybe?"

Salak sneered down his snout at the underling, and smiled that terrifying toothy smile of his. "Take the rest of the day off," he grinned. "All of you, go have a rest."

The lead minion glanced back at the others in disbelief. "R-really, my Lord?" he asked, the relief in his voice bordering on hysteria.

"Of course not," Salak snarled, as a well placed power blast turned the minion to dust. "Just my little joke."

Salak turned his attention back to the viewing screen and the planet it showed. He sighed a warm sigh of satisfaction as he savoured the thought of destroying the world which now almost filled the display. Tonight was going to be a very good night. Tonight was going to be a very good night indeed.

#

Back before his wife had left, the Prime Minister had been rather good at making decisions. In fact, it was precisely his decisive, go-getting nature which had led to him being elected as the leader of the country.

That's not to say he would rush into snap decisions which he'd later come to regret. No, each choice he made would be logical, rational, and made only after considering all the implications of his actions.

These days, however, he was finding his ability to decide things slipping away. Whereas he would once have made choices by 9am which would help shape the future of Britain, nowadays it took him until after lunch to decide which socks to wear. Even then he sometimes found it impossible to choose between the final two pairs, and so instead wore one from each.

He was having a similar crisis now. The decision he was about to make was an important one, which would have huge political ramifications for generations to come.

Once or twice he made his mind-up, only to change it in a panic a few seconds later. For over an hour he'd stood there, staring blankly at an empty patch of wall, weighing up his options.

But it was no use. The decision was too big for him to make on his own. He needed help. He needed—

"Defence Secretary!" he beamed, clapping excitedly as Robin Newton strode purposefully into the room. "You're just in time to help me decide." Still grinning, the PM bent at the knees and lifted two large paint canisters from the floor. "What do you think, purple or orange?"

Robin flinched visibly. "For which room?"

"For this one, of course!" Mills exclaimed, gesturing with his two litre tins at the blank walls all around. "It's so drab in here, don't you think? What do you think of the purple?"

"This ... this *is* The White Room," the Defence Secretary reminded him.

"Yes, yes, I know," dismissed Mills, "but it's so boring!"

"I think the point is that somewhere called *The White Room* should, by and large, be white, though," explained Robin, as diplomatically as he could manage.

"Right, I'm with you," nodded the Prime Minister. "Hearing you loud and clear." He lowered one paint can and raised the other. "You prefer the orange."

"Perhaps we could discuss this later?" said Robin, with a sigh. "There is a more pressing matter to attend to." He paused, to make sure the Prime Minister was listening. "There's another spaceship."

The paint tins hit the floor in unison.

"Another one?" the PM gasped. "Are you sure?"

"It's larger than the last one," nodded the Secretary of Defence. "Larger and much, much faster."

"Can we project its route?"

"We can and we have. It's the North West again. A village just South of the Scottish border."

"How long until it arrives?"

"An hour. Ninety minutes, perhaps."

"Then there's no time to lose!" the Prime Minister cried. "We must go there and meet it!"

"I have the Royal Air Force standing by to intercept."

"Nonsense!" Mills screeched. "We can't send armed fighters to meet our intergalactic guests! Think of the impression it'd give."

Robin's brow creased into a puzzled frown. "So, what are you suggesting?"

"We'll go. You and I. We'll hop in a helicopter and scoot on up there!"

"Prime Minister," began Robin, aghast, "you can't seriously be suggesting the two of us go and meet a potentially hostile alien race by ourselves?!"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting, Robin!" There was a twinkle in the PM's eye now, which hadn't been there in a long time. "Think of it, we'll be the first people ever to see a real live extra-terrestrial!"

"Out of the question," the Defence Secretary scowled. "From a safety point of view alone, it's--"

"Hands up everyone who's the Prime Minister," interrupted Matthew, thrusting his arm straight up in the air above his head. He grinned broadly as the Secretary of Defence shook his head and sighed. "Oh, just me then," the PM said, clapping his hands in excitement. "Quickly, Robin," he barked, "to the Matt Copter!"

#

On the outskirts of a village just a little south of the Scottish border, Johnny clutched the back of his head and danced around the junkyard.

"What did you do that for?" he wailed.

"Well nothing else was working," Jack explained. "So I thought I'd try hitting you with a spade."

"Well couldn't you at least have warned-- Will you *please* stop hitting me with that spade?!"

"Will you *please* figure out how to switch your cosmic powers on then?" Jack snapped. "I'm sure I don't need to remind you of the gravity of the situation."

"Of course you don't," Johnny bit back. "I'm trying my best!"

"Oh, well I'm sure if we explain that to the evil alien warlord Hell bent on destroying all life on Earth, then he won't mind circling round a few times until you've figured it out!"

"You're thinking about it too much," Krygor interjected, stepping between the bickering brothers. "Don't think about unlocking the Annihilator's power. Just unlock it."

"Oh well, thank you Yoda," Johnny snapped. "Why ever didn't you say that before?"

"I did."

"I know! About a hundred times. I was being sarcastic."

"Well I'm only trying to help," Krygor sulked, turning away from the boys. Johnny and Jack looked at each other and shrugged.

"Are you," Johnny began, hesitantly. "Are you crying?"

"I'm the third most evil being in all existence," Krygor retorted, his voice cracking just a little. "Of course I'm not bloody crying!"

All three of them stood in silence for a while, none of them really knowing what to say. It was Johnny who eventually broke the conversational deadlock.

"Listen," he said, gently, resting a hand on Krygor's shoulder. He had to stand on his tiptoes to do it. "How about you try finding out where your brother is, see if you can figure out how much time we've got left before he gets here."

"I have long range scanners on The Annoyer," Krygor replied, his voice still unsteady. "But to be honest, I've never figured out how to work them. There was no manual with the ship when I bought it," he offered, apologetically.

"I could probably work it out!" Jack offered, excitedly. "It'll all be based on energy waves, I'd imagine. Shouldn't be that difficult."

"Worth a try," Krygor conceded. He got to his feet and discretely wiped his eyes with the corner of his sleeve, being careful not to let either of the boys see.

"What will you do?" Jack asked.

"Practice," Johnny shrugged. "Stop thinking about unlocking the Annihilator's power and just, you know, unlock it."

"Good luck," his younger brother smiled, unable to hide the shake in his own voice.

"You too," Johnny replied, hoarsely. He grabbed his brother and gave him a brief, but warm hug.

"What?" Krygor sniffed, as they turned to look at him. "It's something in my eye, that's all!"

#

For his sixth birthday, after almost twelve months of dropping hints, asking outright, and finally just plain nagging, Jack had received a chemistry set. By lunch time he

had created a stink bomb. By dinner time he'd progressed to weapons of mass destruction. It was the best present he had ever been given, and unwrapping the gift on that cold October morning had been the most exciting moment of his young life.

Until now.

Alien technology pulsed and hummed in his hands, reacting to each subtle twitch of his fingers and palms. A three dimensional hologram of the solar system floated in the air just in front of him. The planets spun and rotated as Jack manipulated the controls.

"How did you do that?" Krygor gasped, as he reached out to touch the planets and stuck a finger right through Uranus.

"It's hard to explain," Jack replied, concentrating hard on the movements of his hands as he scoured the galaxy for Salak's ship. "Assuming we don't all die horribly I'll teach you later."

"I suppose our lives are in your brother's hands now," Krygor said, concern in his voice.

"You think he'll figure it out?" Jack asked, as he widened the search to take in a larger area of space. "Honestly?"

"I hope so," Krygor shrugged. "There is much about this planet that I would like to discover for myself."

"Yes, I suppose that would be difficult were it to be blown up."

"It would be impossible."

"That was a joke, Krygor."

"Oh," the alien said, confused. "I see." He paused for a moment, then shifted his gaze from the mini galaxy to the boy controlling it. "You are a strange species you Earthlings."

"I suppose we are," Jack admitted. "Can I ask you something?" he said, after some thought.

"It's not about how to use any of this stuff, is it?" Krygor checked, as the hologram zoomed quickly back into the Milky Way galaxy.

"No, nothing like that."

"Then of course," the alien nodded. "Ask away."

"Why are you helping us?"

Krygor turned away from Jack and stared long and hard at the third holographic planet from the sun as it spun its way through scale model space. So small. So fragile. So perfect.

"I do not know," Krygor answered, honestly. "Never in my life have I considered betraying Galaag Six. Never in my life have I dared." The Earth grew larger in the hologram as Jack zoomed in. "There is something about this planet," Krygor mused, "something I can't describe, but which makes me want to see it spared." Before him the world spun, growing larger and larger until it dwarfed even him. "I have reluctantly watched dozens of worlds die by Salak's hand," he sighed. "But this one ... This one feels different."

"No!" Jack gasped.

"It does," Krygor insisted. "It feels very--"

"Not that," Jack cut in, urgently. "That."

Krygor peered at the tiny speck which floated above the Earth as Jack zoomed further in towards it. The alien's hand flew to his mouth in horror.

"Oh no," he whispered. "Not yet."

On the floating globe, a tiny holographic battle cruiser hovered directly above their location.

"He's here," Jack gulped. "Salak is here."

#

Salak looked down on the junkyard which lay just a few hundred yards below the cloaked *Destruktor*, and idly flicked a reptilian tongue across his razor-like teeth. A cold trickle of blood filled his mouth. He savoured the moment. There was something almost magical about these instants before innocent blood was shed. It was his second favourite time of all, runner-up only to the actual moment itself that innocent blood was shed.

Down there he could detect The Cosmic Annihilator, apparently in the possession of an Earthling, of all things. This would not do. This would not do at all.

"Decloak," he said, to nobody but himself. "Prepare to fire on my command."

#

The uneven rocky path which led from the school to the junkyard barely slowing them, Jack and Krygor ran as fast as they could to warn Johnny of the danger. To warn him that Salak was here. They frantically scanned the sky as they ran, relieved that there was still no sign of ...

Jack's jaw dropped open in horrified amazement, as an enormous spacecraft materialised in the air less than half a mile above his head. He and Krygor stumbled to a stop, their hearts crashing in their throats.

"What is it doing?" he whispered, scared the slightest sound would draw the attention of the aliens above.

"He must have locked onto the Annihilator," Krygor hissed. "He must have tracked it here."

"We have to warn Johnny! We have to warn him before--"

Jack threw his hands up over his face as a blinding bolt of pure energy erupted from deep within the ship. Desperately, he shook his head, clearing the dazzling glare from his eyes in time to see the entire junkyard erupt in a spectacular ball of flame.

"JOHNNY!" he screamed, as he began to run in the direction of the inferno. A powerful hand clutched him by the arm.

"You can't go in there," Krygor told him, "you'll die."

"Get off me!" Jack screeched, struggling free of the big man's grasp. "I've got to go help him!"

Krygor gave chase as Jack took off towards the burning junkyard, catching him just before he made a dive for a gap in the flaming wreckage.

"You would give your life for your brother?" Krygor demanded, kneeling down to look the boy in the eyes. "Even when you know there is little chance he could have survived?"

The flames flickered and danced, reflected in the burning tears on Jack's cheeks, as he twisted in Krygor's grasp once more. "Please," he wept. "I've got to try."

"No," Krygor said, standing up and steeling himself as the heat of the nearby fire singed his skin. "I'll go. I stand a better chance of survival. Wait here."

"How touching," a scaly voice hissed from nearby. Jack and Krygor turned in time to see Salak finish teleporting to the planet's surface. "And how pathetic," he snarled.

"S-Salak," Krygor stammered. "W-What have you done?"

"I have cleared the area," Salak explained, forming his claws into fists over and over again, "and now I shall do what you could not, and retrieve The Cosmic Annihilator for the glory of Galaag Six."

"You killed a boy," Krygor told him, aghast. Behind him, something caught Jack's attention as it moved in the flames.

"And I shall kill countless more," Salak sang, the very thought of the death and destruction he was about to rain down filling him with joy. "I shall kill them all!"

"Johnny?" Jack gaped, as his brother stepped from the fire, unharmed.

“The boy is gone,” the figure thundered, his eyes burning all the colours of the spectrum, his very skin itself pulsing with raw energy. “I am ...” he began, and then he said a Word – a Word completely unpronounceable in our human tongue, but which sounded almost *exactly* like the sound of a whale sneezing.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

What had once been Johnny approached the group, his footsteps scorching the ground as he walked slowly in their direction. Krygor held Jack back as he tried to run to his brother. He stepped in front of the boy, protectively, as the most powerful thing in all the universe idly strolled up. Behind The Cosmic Annihilator an invisible force snuffed out the junkyard flames.

“Impossible!” Salak spat. “No Earthling could survive such an explosion! Unless ...” The alien’s eyes already narrow eyes narrowed even further in suspicion.

“Who would seek to do me harm?” a soft, but powerful voice from within Johnny asked, as he regarded the trio, impassively. Jack and Krygor hurriedly pointed at Salak. Two fiercely bright eyes shifted their focus to the Galaagian. “Why would you seek to do me harm?”

“You?” Salak scoffed. “You are The Cosmic Annihilator?”

“That is but one name of endless thousands,” the voice continued. “I have existed since before the dawn of time, and I ask you again: Why would you seek to do me harm?”

"My eternal apologies, Annihilator," Salak sorried, as he dropped to one knee before the glowing figure and hung his head. "I beg of you, please forgive me."

"This isn't right," Krygor whispered to Jack. "Salak would sooner die than humble himself before anyone." He reflected on this for a moment. "Well, apart from Mum."

Jack watched as Salak subtly shifted his weight to the balls of his clawed feet, and covertly pressed a sequence of buttons on his wrist device.

"Johnny, look out!" Jack yelped, as he threw himself at his brother and tried, too late, to knock him out of the way. A glowing green sphere suddenly surrounded the brothers, floating them off the ground.

"It works!" Salak yelled, triumphantly. "The nullifier works!"

Krygor watched on in horror as Jack hammered on the inside of the semi-transparent sphere. His cries for help seemed faint and distant. The Cosmic Annihilator frowned as it also tried without success to break free of the floating prison.

"You've restrained the Annihilator," Krygor gasped. "How is that possible?"

"I have devised a way of using the Annihilator's power against it," Salak boasted, indicating the device on his wrist. "I have constructed The Cosmic Nullifier! The more the Annihilator struggles, the stronger its bonds shall become!"

Inside the bubble, Jack struggled to hear what was being said by the aliens outside. The sphere was cramped and small, and was already getting very warm. The air would not last long, he knew – a few minutes at most. They had to get out. Jack cried out in fright as the sphere took off into the air, headed in the direction of Salak's ship.

"Where are you taking them?" Krygor croaked. "What about the other boy? He is no threat."

"He will suffocate soon enough," Salak dismissed. "And the Annihilator will remain caged on the ship until we return to Galaag Six."

"Let the younger boy go," Krygor begged. "There is no need to hurt him."

"You seem to be forgetting, *brother*," Salak hissed, rounding on Krygor and lifting him clear off the ground with one clawed hand, "just where your loyalties lie!" Salak's four eyes scowled, unblinking, at Krygor, who seemed to shrink in the alien's grip. "Now," Salak continued, letting his brother drop painfully to the ground, "let us begin."

"B-Begin what?"

"Let us begin the elimination of all life on Earth!" He turned and scanned the horizon, his eyes falling on the dim lights of the distant school hall. "There," he glowered. "The perfect place to start!"

#

"There, sir, I have a visual!" The pilot's voice crackled through the Prime Minister's headphones, barely audible over the *whumming* of the rotor blades. Up ahead, a vast, sleek spaceship hung in the air like an armoured insect.

"My God," gasped the Secretary of State for Defence. "It's enormous. It's ... It's ..." He hesitated, unable to come up with any other adjectives which could suitably describe the scale of the vessel before them. "Enormous."

The Prime Minister's foot tapped excitedly on the floor of the helicopter. The sight of the spaceship had sent a thrilling tingle the length of his spine, like an electric shock of pure joy. A spacecraft. An actual alien spacecraft! He could hardly believe it was happening.

"Down there!" he heard the Defence Secretary squeak. "It's ... That's ..."

"An extra-terrestrial!" squawked the pilot's voice across the radio. "Confirmed sighting of extra-terrestrial directly below."

"I can't see, I can't see!" squealed the PM. He cursed himself for not sitting on the other side of the chopper. "What does it look like?"

"It's ... It's green," said the Defence Secretary, his voice trembling in shock. "And big. Very big. It's like a great, big, green lizard!"

"GODZILLA! I knew it!" the Prime Minister bellowed. He unclipped his seat belt and leaned across his fellow passenger, until his face was pressed against the window. "Hello down there!" he shouted. "Welcome to Earth!"

"I don't think it can hear you," announced Defence Secretary Newton, trying to push the PM off him. "Anyway, maybe we shouldn't attract its attention. It doesn't look very friendly."

"Nonsense!" The Prime Minister began to fiddle with the door catch. "How does this thing open? Hello down there!"

"What are you doing, you madman?" gasped Robin. "You can't open that, we'll fall!"

Actually, now that the Defence Secretary thought about it, he wouldn't fall. He was safely strapped into his seat. The only person who would be in any danger of falling would be ...

"Allow me, Prime Minister," said Robin, a smile splitting his face from ear to ear. With a grunt, he took hold of the door catch and pulled it to the left. In an instant the door slid wide open, and the helicopter was filled by a wild, howling wind.

The Prime Minister let out a startled scream of shock. Up front, the pilot barked something into the radio, but the rushing of air in the cabin swallowed up all other sound.

Suddenly, a blinding blast of pure energy stabbed up at the chopper, sending it spiralling wildly off course. Like a man possessed, the pilot heaved and tugged on the controls, desperately trying to regain control of the aircraft.

As the `copter banked left, Prime Minister Mills felt his feet lose their grip on the floor. He tried to shout for help, but the winds whipped his words away before they had fully formed in his mouth.

Another bolt of energy split the sky to the right of the helicopter, and suddenly Matthew was falling, falling, falling towards the distant ground. Above and behind him, the air scorched as another energy blast hit the still-spinning chopper square on the underbelly. In an instant the entire aircraft – as well as its two remaining occupants – were nothing more than a drifting cloud of ash.

The PM closed his eyes as the wind whipped angrily at them. Below him, the ground stretched out like an extremely solid flat thing. It seemed a long way away, but he'd be reaching it soon enough.

A second and a half later, Matthew Mills, Prime Minister of the British Isles, landed with a very unceremonious *thud*.

#

"Pathetic," snarled Salak, as he watched the last remnants of what had until recently been a military helicopter float harmlessly to the ground. Faint lines of grey smoke curled up from his fingertips. He blew them away and turned his attention back to the school. "Now," he growled, "where were we?"

#

Inside the hall, Holly tapped her foot, impatiently. All around her, costumed characters lined the walls, none of them daring to be the first to dance. The hall shook with the deafening reverberations of the music system, which pumped out the latest dance hit louder than it had ever been pumped out before.

"Remember," barked Mr. Greaves as he sidled up to her. "If there is any trouble here tonight – *any trouble at all* – then it is you who shall pay the price, Miss Masters."

"Yes, you said," Holly replied. "There won't be any trouble."

"There had better not be," Mr. Greaves warned. "Because whatever trouble there is will be visited tenfold upon you, Miss Masters. Upon you!"

Holly rolled her eyes as the headmaster strolled off in the direction of the teachers' table, scowling at everyone along the way. She turned her attention from Mr. Greaves and looked at the clock on the wall.

Eight minutes. Eight minutes late. How could he? It wasn't as if he'd had much to do, either. Just find a costume, put it on, and turn up. She'd been the one who'd had to single-handedly organise the entire event, not to mention get her own costume ready.

She looked down at the resplendent ball gown she wore, the twinkling lights on the wall reflecting off its sequins. She patted her hair, which curled down over her shoulders. Atop her head sat an ornate, but fragile crown. The Queen of the Fairy Lights had become the Princess of the Ball.

And right now, the Princess of the Ball was very, very annoyed. Nine minutes. Nine minutes late. How could he? How *dare* he?

She spun, angrily, as the door to the hall was thrown open.

"What time do you call--" she began, before realising the green-skinned monstrosity which had just come through the door was most definitely not Johnny. "What are you supposed to be?" she frowned.

"Duh! Frankenstein," Stan scowled, barging past her, his rubber neck bolts wobbling as he walked. "Now where's the food?"

#

In the hold of *The Destruktor*, the prison orb floated a few inches above the hatch which had just slid closed below it. The only illumination in the room came from the green glow of the globe itself, as it cast spooky shadows over the crates of alien cargo which lay stacked all around.

Jack wiped the sweat from his brow and tugged at the collar of his school shirt, trying to get more air. There was barely any oxygen left in the sphere. The end was near.

"You have to get us out of here, Johnny," he wheezed. "Salak said it's your own powers which are feeding the prison. You need to stop using your powers."

"Johnny is gone," the being in Johnny's body responded, impassively. "Only I remain."

"Don't you understand?" Jack wailed. "He's going to kill everyone, Johnny! He's going to kill everyone!"

"Johnny is gone," the being in Johnny's body repeated. "Only I remain."

Stars twinkled and danced before Jack's eyes, like a wall full of fairy lights. The air was getting thin. Time was running out!

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The vast emptiness of the infinite stretched off in all directions and vanished into the distance, knowing full well it would never reach an end but trying all the same. A smothering blackness pushed down on Johnny, restraining him, forcing him down into the darkness of his subconscious mind. Somewhere nearby footsteps echoed. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.

Johnny closed his eyes tightly as a figure of pure light emerged from the nothingness before him, burning so bright that Johnny could still see it through his closed eyelids. He didn't need to ask who the figure was.

"Where am I?" he asked, his voice strangely muffled by the darkness. "What have you done with me?"

"You are where you have always been, Jonathan Benjamin Weeyerd," the figure said in what sounded to Johnny like a thousand different voices all speaking at the same time. "You are inside your own mind. The only difference is you are no longer in control of it."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Johnny demanded, his own voice sounding fainter and fainter with each word.

"We have merged," the figure chorused. "We are one. However I have become the dominant force in this body. I now control its thoughts, its words, its actions."

"I've got to get back," Johnny cried. "You've got to let me back so I can help them!"

"You may attempt to fight for supremacy," the figure conceded. "However even now you grow weak. Soon you shall be all but gone. Absorbed. Forever."

"They're all going to die!" Johnny shouted, his voice distant and detached. "Let me out, I can save them. *We* can save them!"

"The fate of your world and its people are not my concern," said the figure, the tone of its voices not changing in the slightest. "As they are no longer yours."

"You can't just let them die!" Johnny protested, still not daring to open his eyes. "You've got to do something!"

"Would you expect a droplet of water in the ocean to do something?" the voices chimed. "Or the stars in the night sky?"

"No, but--"

"I am as they," continued the figure, "I have existed since before time and shall exist until beyond it."

"You can't let them all die," Johnny sobbed, his voice barely audible through the darkness, which pressed all around him like a black fog. "If you do then you're evil!"

"Good and evil mean nothing to me," the voices continued. "I am the wind. I am the clouds overhead. I am neither good, nor evil, nor any shade in between. I simply *am*."

Johnny hung his head as he fought for breath in the bleak emptiness of his subconscious mind. The figure still burned as bright as the sun before him, scorched into his eyeballs despite his eyes remaining tightly closed.

"Soon they will all be dead, that is the way of things," the figure said, matter-of-factly. "Your planet. Your friends. Your parents. Your brother. Soon they will all be dead. It is an insignificant event in the workings of the Universe. None shall remember it."

"No!" Johnny snapped, his voice faint but clear as he struggled to open his eyes. "I won't let that happen."

#

Jack's lungs burned in his chest as he fought to stay conscious. Despite his body lying on the floor of the bubble, his head felt like it was floating somewhere around Saturn. The air was thin. So thin. Hard to breathe. Throat swelling. Head light. Focus swimming.

"He's going to kill everyone!" choked Jack. "He's going to kill us all. You have to do something!"

"This is not my concern," the voice inside Johnny said, echoing the speech it had just made within Johnny's mind. "Since before the dawn of time have I existed, and until after time ends shall I exist. I have seen galaxies born and destroyed. I have seen civilisations rise and fall. The fate of your planet is inconsequential."

"Not to me, it isn't," Jack shrilled. "And not to Johnny either." He summoned up as much breath as he could muster. "I know you're in there, Johnny," he said, hoarsely. "If you can hear me you need to take control. I need you." His air almost depleted, Jack slumped down to the bottom of the sphere, tears welling in his eyes. "The world needs you."

"Johnny is gone," the being in Johnny's body repeated, impassively. "Only--"

"Yes, yes, only you remain," Jack managed. "I get it. Shut up."

An expression of brief recognition flashed across The Cosmic Annihilator's face, as Jack's eyes began to close.

#

"Jack?" Johnny gasped, glancing frantically at the emptiness in all directions. "Jack, is that you?"

"Impossible," shrilled the voices of the glowing figure. "This cannot be!"

#

"You shut up," the voice from within Johnny's body spoke, hesitantly, as if testing the words for the first time. Jack forced his eyes open, struggling to stay awake. It was a long shot, but it was his only hope.

"You shut up!" he retorted, weakly.

"N-No," the Annihilator stammered, as the walls of the sphere shimmered faintly. "You shut up!"

"Shut up," Jack demanded, as he struggled to deliver a dead leg to his brother. The walls were trembling now, as Johnny's instinct for argument fought to regain control. One last big push should do it. "And I'm so getting your room."

With an audible pop the bubble holding them burst, and they dropped with a clank to the metal floor of the ship.

"You are so *not* getting my room," Johnny told him, as he pulled his gasping brother to his feet. "Though I might let you carry on sharing it," he smiled. "If you're lucky."

"And if the world doesn't end," Jack pointed out, between gulps of breath.

"He's headed for the school," Johnny said, his eyes glazing over. "He's going to kill them all."

"We have to get down there!"

"I think I could just zap us down there, but I can't risk losing control," winced Johnny, the memory of being trapped in the recesses of his own mind still fresh. He shuddered. "I didn't care. You, me, Earth, I didn't care about any of it."

"You have to try!"

"Maybe," Johnny mused. "But maybe not."

#

"I beg you, Salak, do not do this," Krygor pleaded, as his brother strode purposefully towards the entrance of the school hall. "They are but children."

"You were always weak, Krygor," Salak sneered. "It is the will of The Evillest herself that this pathetic planet be wiped from existence. Would you dare defy her? More importantly," he hissed, fixing his brother in another angry stare, "would you dare defy me?"

Krygor opened his mouth to speak, then hung his head in embarrassment and shame.

"N-no," he mumbled, quietly. "The will of The Evillest must be done."

"Indeed," Salak grinned, as he tore the double hall doors from their hinges with absolute ease. "So might I suggest you at least *try* to enjoy it?"

His tail trailing behind him, Salak strode into the hall. Seconds later the music came to an abrupt, scratchy stop. Seconds after that, the screaming started.

#

The minions on the command deck jumped in fright as the door swished open and Johnny and Jack ran in. The sight of the dozen or so small, furry aliens standing trembling before them stopped the brothers in their tracks.

"P-Please," one of the aliens begged. "Do not hurt us!"

"What ... Who are you?" Johnny asked.

"W-We are Minions," one of them began, "of the enslaved world of Min."

"Salak's slaves?" asked Jack. The Minions all nodded, quickly.

"You know how to work the ship?" Johnny demanded.

"N-No," another of them confessed. "We do not."

"None of you?" Johnny pressed. At the back of the huddled group, a small, furry hand slowly raised. "Yes?" urged Johnny, hopefully.

"I h-have studied the controls," he confessed. Around him, his fellow Minions gasped in horror. "Secretly," he added, ignoring their whispers.

"Can you teleport us down to the surface?" Johnny quizzed.

"I think so," the Minion replied, nodding.

"Good," Johnny grinned. "Then congratulations, you're now the captain of this spaceship."

"Oh no," gasped the Minion in horror. "I can not be captain. That is impossible!"

"Why?"

"We are Minions!" said the furry little creature, as if this was explanation enough. When he spotted the boys' confused expressions, he continued: "Since our first civilisation was born, the people of Min have existed only to serve. For generation after generation we have been born into lives of endless, thankless slavery." The Minion lowered his head, ashamed. "We are a race of followers. We could no more be leaders than we could be amusingly shaped root vegetables."

Johnny tutted. He didn't have time for this. "Come on, one of you must be able to take command. Surely someone is up to it?" He gazed around the command deck, imploringly. As one, the Minions averted their eyes.

"Er, Johnny ..." Jack began. He was standing with his back to his brother, gazing at something outside the ship.

"A little busy here, Jack." Johnny stared down at the Minions. Time was ticking away. If he didn't get a move on soon, it'd be too late. He needed someone to take control of the ship. His plan relied on it.

"It's quite important," Jack insisted, quietly.

"What is it?" his brother demanded, whirling round. "I'm trying to pick a ..." His voice trailed off as he spotted the suited man, who was currently clinging for dear life to the front windscreen of the command deck. Even with its slightly wild-eyed

expression, Johnny recognised the face of the man waving in at him. There weren't many people in the country who wouldn't. "... leader," he finished, at last.

"How about," Jack began, raising a finger in the direction of the Prime Minister of Great Britain, "that one?"

#

"SILENCE, PATHETIC EARTH SLIME!"

The children in the hall tried to quieten their howls and wails of fright, as the monstrous alien strode into the middle of the hall, his reptilian tongue hungrily licking his leathery lips. Beside him, Krygor glanced around at the terrified, tear-stained faces and swallowed down his shame.

"I am Salak the Eviller, second most evil being in the universe and first in line to the throne of Galaag Six," Salak informed them. "We have come here--"

"Look, just what is the meaning of this," demanded Mr. Greaves, as he strode across the hall from the direction of the teachers' table. "Who do you think you are, coming--"

The children screamed as a curling bolt of energy twisted from Salak's fingertips and struck the headmaster squarely in the chest. His face barely had time to register the shock before what remained of his molecules floated down to the polished wooden floor.

"As I was saying," Salak continued, "we have come here with the intention of killing you all." Light glinted off his teeth as he glanced at the faces of the innocent all around. He savoured the moment. It was time for the fun to begin. "Who's first?"

The sobbing children edged further away from the lizard-like alien as its four eyes scoured the room for a volunteer.

"No?" he sang. "Very well, then I shall choose." His gaze switched from wonderfully frightened face to wonderfully frightened face. That expression of terror.

If there was a more enjoyable sight in all the universe, he was yet to see it. His eyes finally fell on a nearby figure, its green skin slightly less repugnant than the rosy pink of the others. "You," he hissed, as he pointed a pointy finger in Stan's direction.

"You first."

"Please, no, please!" Stan begged, as Salak strode forward and snatched him off his feet. "I don't want to die," the bully wept. "Please, please, I don't want to die!"

"How unfortunate, then, that you have no say in the matter," Salak said, as he lowered his snout and inhaled the enchanting aroma of terror which floated from the boy's every pore.

"Please," Stan whimpered, his voice barely audible, as Salak's tongue flicked hungrily over its lips. "Don't kill me."

"Oh, leave him alone!" barked a voice from nearby. Every face in the room turned in the direction of Holly, just as every pupil not currently being sniffed by an alien took a single step away from her. Salak regarded her, curiously. Both sets of eyes lit up as he took in the crown on her head.

"You are Royalty?" he hissed, barely able to believe his luck. Stan's cry as he hit the floor was a mixture of pain and relief. Krygor hurriedly nudged him out of Salak's line of sight as the larger alien rounded on Holly. "You are in charge here?"

"Well actually," Holly replied, her hands shaking despite her attempts to appear confident and relaxed. "I suppose I am."

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Holly promised herself that no matter what happened, she wasn't going to scream. She knew the horror which held her would enjoy it more if she screamed. She bit her lip as its claws scratched the skin on her arms. His teeth hovered just centimetres from her face. She could smell death on his breath. Death, and what may have been pickled onions. It was hard to tell, and right now it was way, way down her list of concerns.

"That's enough," Krygor croaked. "L-leave her alone."

Salak turned and hissed at his younger brother, sending him scurrying a few steps back, nervously wringing his hands. The monster regarded him with contempt, then turned his attention back to Holly.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he breathed. "And I promise, Your Highness, I promise it'll hurt. I promise it will hurt *a lot*."

"I said," Krygor repeated, his voice a terrified squeak as he took hold of Salak's tail and yanked it as hard as he could. "Leave her alone!"

"You dare!" Salak roared, releasing Holly and spinning to face his brother.

"You dare challenge me?"

"Just ... Just leave them alone," Krygor stumbled. "They're just children. I w-won't let you hurt them."

"Oh?" Salak grinned. "And how do you intend to stop me?" The alien laughed loudly as Krygor held his hands up in a boxing position. "Very well then, *brother*," he cackled. "Let us settle this now."

Krygor staggered as Salak's powerful tail slammed into his side, knocking the wind from him instantly. He looked up in time to see Salak leaping towards him, fangs bared, claws outstretched. Krygor hit the ground hard as his brother landed on top of him.

Hot alien saliva dripped down into Krygor's face as he fought to push Salak away. The clawed hands were already at his throat, choking him, squeezing the very life from within him.

"I have always been stronger," Salak screeched, "I have always been more powerful, more fearless, more *evil*!" Blackness swum before Krygor's eyes as the claws at his throat tightened still further. "And yet she always preferred you," Salak seethed, as years of frustration and anger finally exploded to the surface. "She always preferred her precious stolen human baby over her own son!"

"Wh-what?" Krygor managed, his already bulging eyes widening still further in amazement.

"On come on," Salak sniggered. "You didn't really think you were one of us, did you? You didn't really think you were of Galaagian blood?" Salak's eyes shone crystallised hatred as he squeezed the last of the breath from Krygor's body. "You are worthless human slime, like the rest of these Earthlings! And yet she always preferred you! Why?" he demanded. "Why? Why? Wh--"

Salak screeched as a metal chair bent in half across the back of his head. He leapt furiously to his feet.

"Maybe he's less irritating," Jack shrugged.

"You!" Salak barked.

"And me," Johnny smiled, stepping up next to his brother.

"The Cosmic Annihilator!" the alien gasped.

"Actually, I prefer Johnny."

As Salak and Johnny slowly began to circle each other, Jack dragged Krygor to his feet.

"I owe you my life," Krygor gulped. "You saved me."

"Us little brothers have to stick together," Jack told him. "Now come on, Johnny wants us to get everyone else out of here."

"Do you really expect me to allow these vermin to escape?" Salak laughed, as Jack and Krygor ushered the children out through the broken doorframe. "You forget the power I have at my command!" Johnny watched as the alien flicked a switch on his wrist. "Destruktor," he commanded. "Destroy the fleeing humans." He grinned at Johnny. "Now listen for the screams of your friends as the very flesh is burned--"

"Sorry, old boy," responded a voice via the communicator. A smile broke out across Johnny's face. "No can do."

#

On the command deck of *The Destruktor*, the assembled Minions giggled nervously. Up front, the PM leaned back in the commander's chair and smiled as he spoke into the intercom mounted on its arm.

"This is Captain Mills of the Starship ... er ... Minion," he said. "I'm afraid we are unable to comply with that request, on account of you being a right nasty piece of work." The furry aliens behind him jumped with fright as a string of bellowed

obscenities filled the airwaves. The Prime Minister shrugged and shut off the communication channel.

"First Officer Minion," he smiled, spinning in the captain's chair of the newly Christened *Starship Minion* and addressing the only person on the ship who had the faintest idea of how to operate it. "Where shall we go?"

The furry man from Min looked startled by the question. He glanced nervously around at his fellow Minions, who could only stare blankly back.

"I wouldn't know, sir," First Officer Minion mumbled, at last.

"Nonsense! There must be somewhere you'd like to go?!"

"Not really, sir," the alien replied, gazing nervously at his feet. "Except maybe ..."

"Yes?" encouraged the new captain, when it was clear his First Officer wasn't about to continue. "Except maybe?"

First Officer Minion looked up, revealing eyes blurred faintly by tears.

"To Min, sir," he croaked. "I'd like to go back to Min." All around, other Minions whispered in nervous agreement, boosting the First Officer's confidence. "It's silly, sir, I know, but I was taken away as a boy, and since then it's felt like ... like there's been something missing, sir. If you know what I mean?"

The Prime Minister nodded slowly. "You know, my little friend? I know *exactly* what you mean." He spun once again in his seat and took one last look at the lush green of England, spread out like a patchwork quilt below. "Plot a course to Min," he said, a thin smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Best speed."

First Officer Minion stared at the human in utter disbelief for a few long moments. Eventually, when he was sure his ears hadn't been deceiving him, he stood to attention and fired off a salute.

"Aye aye, captain!"

The former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom watched the hills and lakes as they slowly began to roll by beneath the ship. From what little his new crew had told him, they were the first Minions in countless million years to enjoy the taste of freedom. He was determined they would not be the last.

"Course plotted, captain!"

"Very good, Mr Minion," Captain Mills nodded, as the ship spun on its axis and pointed up to the inky blackness of space. "Warp speed, now!"

Without another word, the galaxy suddenly surged forward, as the crew of the *Starship Minion* shot off into space, boldly going where no Minion had gone before:

Home.

#

"Sorry about that," Johnny said, as he and Salak continued to circle each other in the now empty hall. "But to be honest it didn't sound like you were a very nice boss."

"You do realise you can't win, don't you?" Salak spat. "As long as you continue to suppress the Annihilator's power you stand no chance against me. As soon as you give in to its power you become my prisoner." The alien laughed as Johnny realised he was telling the truth. "Either way, my victory is assured!"

Johnny toppled backwards as Salak's tail swept his feet from under him. The alien hissed with glee as Johnny's eyes began to glow.

"Yessssss!" he laughed, his fingers flying to the device on his wrist. "Give in to its power. Let it overwhelm you!"

Johnny scrambled to his feet and fought to regain control. Salak was right. If he let The Cosmic Annihilator's power take over him then all would be lost. If he didn't, however, then Salak would rip him limb from limb until he finally gave in to it. There had to be another way. There had to be.

Johnny's body shook as he struggled to stay in control of it. Millennia old power screamed inside him to be set free.

"You cannot fight it," Salak cackled. "You're The Cosmic Annihilator. It controls you. You have no choice but to become what you already are!"

"What I am," the boy trembled, his skin soaked with the effort of staying in command, "is Johnny Weeyerd."

The power of a thousand exploding suns burned bright and hot inside him, longing to be unlocked, longing to be free. Salak's eyes twinkled as his finger hovered over the button which would activate the nullifier and trap the Annihilator once more.

Johnny closed his eyes as the struggle within him continued. He was The Cosmic Annihilator. He was Johnny Weeyerd. Both sides twisted and fought as each battled to consume the other.

A powerful leathery fist struck him across the face, sending him spinning backwards. He closed his eyes even tighter as he resisted the temptation to give in to the power which swelled angrily inside him.

"Leave my boyfriend alone!"

Oh no! No, no, no! What was she doing? Why had she come back? Johnny opened his eyes and turned in the direction the voice had come from. Holly stomped back in through the broken doorway, the sleeves of her dress rolled up to the elbows.

"Your queen has returned," Salak hissed.

"I'm not your boyfr ..." Johnny began to shout through gritted teeth, then stopped and turned to Salak. "My what? Oh so she's my *queen* now? I suppose she told you that, did she?!"

Johnny yelped in pain as Salak delivered another powerful blow to the side of his head, catching him off guard and sending him spinning once more. The alien laughed as Johnny straightened up, a droplet of blood trickling from a fresh wound on his cheek. Johnny's whole body vibrated as the glowing figure within him roared once more to be set free. It would end the pain, he knew—

"Stop it, leave him alone!"

A fist arched through the air above his head as he ducked. He barely managed to roll away as Salak's tail slammed down, shattering the floorboards underfoot. All this would be over, if he just gave in—

"Stop fighting!"

Something sharp sliced through the front of his shirt, scraping off a layer of skin. Close. Too close. The voice within him demanded to be released. He tried to resist. He tried. So difficult. So hard to fight it.

"WILL YOU STOP FIGHTING!" shrieked Holly. Johnny jumped backwards as she smashed a speaker down over Salak's head, encasing him within it from the shoulders up. "Violence solves nothing," she added, dusting herself down. The alien twisted and thrashed as it wrestled with the amplifier.

"What are you doing? Why did you come back?" Johnny demanded, as the voices within him continued to argue. "You're not supposed to be here!"

"I wasn't just going to leave my--"

"Don't say it!"

"What?"

"Don't call me your boyfriend!"

"Why not?" Holly shrilled.

"BECAUSE I'M NOT YOUR BOYFRIEND!"

With an ear-splitting crack, Salak ripped one side of the speaker off, splintering the wood into a hundred little pieces.

"Why do you always do that?" said Holly. "Why do you always have to turn everything into an argument?"

Johnny clutched his head as the battle continued to rage within. "What ... are you ... talking about?" he managed, his eyes rolling in his head as The Cosmic Annihilator fought to regain control.

"You always do it," Holly fumed. "You always create arguments where there aren't any. I was *about* to say I wasn't going to leave my best friend to face a giant lizard Hell beast on his own, but oh no, you have to go wading in, starting an argument. Why do we have to fight all the time?"

Her words echoed around inside his head, making only scraps of sense, as his inner turmoil threatened to spew out of his head and into the world. "S-ssssorry," he grimaced.

"It is possible for us to co-exist peacefully, you know?" she sighed. "We don't have to fight all the--" She cried out in pain as a clawed hand grabbed her by the hair and threw her into a stack of chairs. She hit them, then hit the ground hard.

Johnny barely felt the punch that knocked him clean off his feet. He scarcely noticed the weight on his legs, or the blow after crunching blow which rained down upon his head and upper body as he lay helpless on the floor. His eyes were tightly closed. All he could see was the glowing figure burned onto his eyelids. All he could feel was the battle inside him, as twelve-year-old schoolboy fought against millennia old cosmic power, both trying to wrestle control of the same body. *Why did they always have to argue? Was he The Cosmic Annihilator? Was he Johnny Weeyerd? Both fought for supremacy within, their battle threatening to turn him inside out and tear him apart. Why did they fight all the time?*

Blackness began to close in all around him, as Salak screeched in triumph. Another powerful but unnoticed strike connected with Johnny's face. The vast power of the Annihilator rushed towards the surface, overwhelming him. He tried to force it down, tried to fight back, but it was too much. It was too powerful. The smothering darkness enveloped him as Salak struck him again. He had failed. He had ...

*It's possible for us to co-exist peacefully, you know?*

The Universe and everything in it froze. Holly was right. Holly was right! This wasn't the way it had to be. There was another option. He was not The Cosmic Annihilator. He was not Johnny Weeyerd.

He was both.

Without opening his eyes, Johnny restarted the Universe and caught Salak's fist in one hand, crushing the device on the alien's wrist with but a thought. Salak shrieked as he was thrown twenty feet backwards through the air. The Galaagian landed on the buffet table with an undignified splat and a crack of snapping wood.

Johnny rose to his feet, moving slowly, like he had all the time in the world. When he opened his eyes they burned bright and pure with a power – not cosmic, not human, but something else. Something new. He smiled gently as he helped Holly back to her feet.

"How are ...?" she began, unable to believe what had just happened. "What are ...? Why is ...?"

"I'll explain later," he told her. "But you were right – I shouldn't have eaten that hot dog."

Holly shuffled closer to the unmoving Salak and peered down at him. All four of the alien's eyes were closed. Crisps, peanuts, and chicken legs lay scattered over his hulking body. Holly caught sight of the white, gooey matter oozing from one of the alien's ears and tried not to be sick.

"His brains are hanging out," she retched.

Johnny appeared beside her and looked down at the fallen Salak. "Actually, I think that's coleslaw," he told her. "I don't think brains have carrots in them."

"Oh. Yeah."

"Let's go home," he suggested, as they turned from the broken buffet table and headed for the door. "I'm sure the janitor'll get this in the morning."

Suddenly, something green slipped silently around Holly's throat and lifted her clear off the ground. Johnny spun and came face to face with Salak who snarled as he scooped mayonnaise from his ear.

"Try anything and I snap her neck in two," the alien raged, his tail wrapped tightly around Holly's neck. "A tenth of a second and she'd be dead."

"You don't stand a chance against me, Salak," Johnny warned. "Let her go."

"Oh I know I don't stand a chance against The Cosmic Annihilator," the alien admitted. "But that's not the dilemma here. The dilemma is can you destroy me before I destroy your girlfriend?"

"She's not my girlfriend."

Holly's legs thrashed around as she struggled to be free to dispute this point. Johnny was almost relieved that she wasn't able to speak.

"Okay, you keep telling yourself that," grinned Salak. "In the meantime I'm going to walk out of here, get in Krygor's ship, and leave. When I return I will bring a thousand ships and I will wipe out this planet for good. Understand?"

"There's no way I'm--" Johnny began. Holly gagged as Salak tightened his grip on her throat. "Okay, okay," Johnny conceded. "Just don't hurt her." Salak moved backwards towards the door, keeping a close watch on Johnny. Holly's face had started to turn a nasty shade of blue.

"You're just going to get on the ship and leave, right?" Johnny asked, as Salak reached the broken doorway. "No tricks."

"No tricks," Salak nodded. "But I'm taking the girl with me!" He roared with glee as he unleashed the full wrath of his energy blasts at Johnny, staggering him with the force of his fury. Cackling, the alien turned and raced through the door.

Krygor stood before him, waiting.

"Get out of my way," Salak demanded, pushing Krygor hard in the chest.

"No," Krygor refused, stepping back up to the same spot. "Let the girl go."

"I said get out of my way," Salak screeched, striking Krygor a devastating blow across the face.

"No," Krygor reiterated, as blood spurted from his broken nose. He pulled back his arm and smashed a massive fist into Salak's face, causing the alien to cry out in surprise and pain. Krygor powered another punch to the alien's head, staggering him further. With a screech Salak dropped Holly and turned to his adopted brother, just as a powerful uppercut crunched into his bottom jaw.

"You humans are weak," Salak spat, angrily. "Your best attempts, and still I stand! Did you really think your pathetic blows could hope to bring down I, Salak the Evill--"

Krygor bellowed with rage as he struck Salak with all his might. The alien stepped backwards, his eyes opening wide with fear as he bumped against something which had suddenly appeared right behind him. His claws clutched desperately at empty air as he toppled in slow motion and crashed to the ground. Johnny stood up and brushed the dirt from his knees. He and Krygor stepped forward and looked down at the fallen Salak.

"You're a bully," Krygor told Salak, as he rubbed his bruised knuckles. "And you're a terrible brother."

"And you smell like pickled onions," Holly added, nursing a purple bruise which spread like a scarf around her neck.

"I'll kill you!" the monstrosity hissed, his body tensed, ready to leap up and strike. "I'll kill you all!"

"No," Krygor said, as the sky behind him was suddenly filled by the third most feared battle cruiser in all the universe as it decloaked. On board, Jack smiled broadly as he targeted all weapons on the Galaagian. "You won't."

"You'll go," Johnny told Salak. "You'll leave here and you'll never, ever come back."

Salak scowled as he considered his options and realised he had none. He glared up at Krygor.

"The Evillest demanded I bring you home," he snarled. "You would not dare defy her."

"Tell The Evillest ..." Krygor replied, enjoying another deep gulp of the cleanest air he'd ever tasted in his life. "Tell The Evillest that I *am* home."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"So, how was school then, boys?" Mrs. Weeyerd asked as she glided across the kitchen floor, a plate in each hand. The hot sirloin steak on each plate sizzled invitingly as she placed them on the table in front of her sons.

"All right," nodded Johnny. His knife and fork were already held at the ready.

"Moderately challenging," acknowledged Jack, before tearing into his dinner.

"Terrible," sighed Krygor, shaking his head. He picked up an onion ring and studied it, curiously. "I swear, half those children don't want to learn a thing."

"Not my two, I hope, Mr. Krygor?" she asked, taking her own seat between Johnny and her husband.

"Oh, no, no," Krygor dismissed, looking across at the boys. "They've been most helpful in helping me settle into my new job." He thought about Jack's expertly forged references and smiled. "Most helpful indeed."

"Glad to hear it, but if they step out of line you be sure to tell me," insisted Mrs. Weeyerd, as she skewered a mushroom with her fork. "I won't have them taking the mickey, just because they're living under the same roof!"

"Don't worry, if either of them start causing me problems, you'll be the first to know," Krygor smiled.

"You must be awful clever," Mrs Weeyerd beamed. "You know, talking French and that."

"Mr. Krygor speaks every language in the known uni ..." Jack began. He managed to catch himself just in the nick of time. "World," he corrected.

"What?" Mr. Weeyerd asked. "Every language?"

"Every language," Krygor answered, politely.

"Even Russian?"

"Even Russian."

"Even Italian?"

"Every language. Even Italian."

"Even--"

"Could someone pass the salt," Krygor asked, his knuckles going white as he tightly clutched his fork and knife and tried not to lose his temper.

"Wonder what the new head master will be like," Johnny pondered. "He starts after the summer."

"Such a shame about that Mr. Greaves," Mrs. Weeyerd sighed, sadly. "They never did find out what kind of animal that was that got into the school that night, did they?"

"Some kind of lizard or something, wasn't it?" Mr. Weeyerd said, as he chomped on a mouthful of steak.

"Something like that, I believe," Jack confirmed.

"Poor Mr. Greaves," his mum repeated. "I wonder where that nasty beast is now."

"Far away, I'd imagine," said Johnny, knowingly. "Far, far away."

#

Far away, in a distant sector of an even more distant galaxy, the third most feared battle cruiser in all the universe careered helplessly through space, its manual override disabled as the autopilot led it on an endless journey through the vast emptiness of the infinite.

On board, the second most evil being who had ever lived struggled pointlessly against the indestructible bonds which held him tied tightly to the commander's chair. His mighty muscles bulged as he strained in vain to be free.

"One day!" Salak snarled, as *The Annoyer* spun and twisted past unfamiliar stars. "One day I shall have my revenge!"

#

Even further away, in the opposite direction entirely, a grey-haired monstrosity drummed her fingers on the arm of her armchair. Her claws tore holes in the floral pattern material, as she stared hard at the video screen on the wall.

"You sure this thing's on, Brian?" The Evillest shrieked.

"Yes, dear," floated a weary voice from the kitchen.

She took off her glasses and breathed on them. Her foul breath turned the lenses a nasty shade of yellow. Something was wrong. She could feel it in the acid which coarsed through her veins.

Silently, The Evillest wiped her stained spectacles on her knitted cardigan. She should have heard back by now. She slid the glasses back onto her face and adjusted her hair. Something was definitely wrong. There was nothing else for it.

"Brian!" she bellowed.

"Yes, dear?" Brian sighed.

"Be a dear and fetch me coat."

#

"Goodnight, Krygor," Johnny said, as Jack hurried along the hallway and barged past him into the bedroom.

"Bagsy the top bunk!" Jack shrilled, excitedly.

"Goodnight, Johnny," Krygor replied, opening the door to the spare room. He moved to step inside, but hesitated. Something was on his mind. "You know there will be others," he whispered. "Looking for the Annihilator, I mean. Not just Galaagians."

"I guessed there might be," Johnny shrugged. "But we'll deal with it when it happens."

Krygor regarded Johnny's completely unconcerned face and shook his head in bewilderment. He looked down at the ring of onion he still clutched in the palm of his hand. The uneven outline of the circle reminded him of Earth. Of home.

"You are a strange species, you humans," he mused.

"We are," Johnny agreed. He gave the big man a friendly slap on the shoulder. "And none of us more so than you."

#

Johnny let out a sigh of satisfaction as he slipped between the fresh sheets of his bed. Tonight, for the first time in weeks, he wouldn't have his brother's feet in his face. It was a thought almost as comforting as the mattress below him.

"Aren't bunk beds excellent?" Jack chirped. His head suddenly appeared over the edge of the bed frame as he leaned down from the upper bunk.

"Fantastic," Johnny mumbled, barely paying his brother any attention. The mattress wrapped comfortably around him as he curled up and pulled the duvet up under his chin.

"They're one of the best inventions ever," Jack continued. "Seriously, of all time!" He grinned, wickedly. "Bet you wish you had the top bunk."

"Not really."

"I bet you do!"

"I couldn't care less," Johnny replied, his eyes closed.

“What do you think is the best invention ever? Apart from bunk beds, I mean.”

Johnny drew his knees up to his chest and sunk down into the warmth of his bed. Aside from six glorious weeks without school, he didn't know what the future would bring. He didn't know what was to come. All he knew was that there was nothing to compare to this exact instant. Whatever he was; schoolboy, Cosmic Annihilator, or something else entirely, he was happy. That, for now, was all that mattered.

“Shut up, Jack,” he smiled, and then he drifted peacefully off to sleep.