

LAZY ROBOTS

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The sky was blue. It was the bluest blue that Tweeter had ever seen. The leaves of a palm tree rippled in the breeze, and a fluffy cloud floated in the air.

"It's a great vacation," said Tweeter. "Cost a lot of money. And without the money...no vacation."

Tweeter had quite a story to tell. How did they get the money? That was a story, too.

"But something happened," said Tweeter. "We got lucky. And luck was just what we needed. Made a change from trouble. In fact, it was bad trouble." Tweeter stopped for a moment, and looked at the view around her.

The sea was blue. It was a different blue than the sky above, but every bit as blue.

The beach was yellow. It was the yellowest yellow...

...but that was getting silly. Tweeter was standing on a yellow, sandy beach. It was a wonderful place to be.

Tweeter was a robot. She had pink paintwork, a round silver head and gold plating like a bob of blonde hair. Even though Tweeter was a robot, she looked a lot like a little girl.

Tweeter stretched one of her spindly, silver arms. She pointed up at the rippling palm leaves. "Rota! Come down, Rota!" yelled Tweeter. But Rota didn't come down.

"That's Rota," said Tweeter. "He's stuck up the tree. Oh - have it your way, Rota!" she yelled. "Don't moan if your battery goes flat!" Tweeter forgot about Rota. He'd come when he was ready.

"Dad's glad. He doesn't have to work," said Tweeter. "At least, for a week or so. I don't think I'm homesick, but I'll tell the tale. We're glad to be lazy robots."

Tweeter gazed up at the bright, blue sky. She thought of the stars and planets beyond. Yes...she was a lazy robot, on a very lazy planet. But she lived on another world, a long way away. That was a very busy place indeed...

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The spaceship made a deep rumbling sound. It was a filthy Garbage Grinder spaceship, with a chunky cabin and a huge metal drum. It could hold a mountain of rubbish.

The Garbage Grinder left a trail of smoke as it crossed the void of space. There was a star system beyond the smoke, like a handful of scattered beads. It had a huge, colourful planet with swirling clouds. There were tiny moons nearby.

The Garbage Grinder roared towards the tiny moons. The controls were bleeping and flashing, and the dials said everything was okay. One of the moons appeared on a TV screen. It was a rocky place, which was half in shadow. The moon grew larger and larger.

"Lock onto Dump Zone," said Skipper.

A computer target clicked on.

"Dump Zone lock, A-okay," said Dumper.

The Garbage Grinder flew towards the rocky moon. It was a tiny speck in front of the huge, colourful planet. The swirling clouds could swallow many, many moons. No-one knew what lay below them.

The rocky moon grew bigger through the windows. "Unlock tipper drum," said Skipper.

Dumper pressed a button. There was a clunking sound. "Tipper drum unlocked," he said.

The rocky moon was closer now. Skipper could see the cracks and craters. "Drop to a low swoop," said Skipper.

"Grinder dropping," said Dumper. He pushed two or three buttons and pulled a lever.

The Garbage Grinder fired its retro-rockets. These slowed the spaceship down. The cloudy planet was a beautiful place, but the spaceship had a job to do. It dropped towards the rocky moon.

There was a space-flower growing on a patch of land, in the middle of a crater. It was part of a small clump of space-flowers, with a grim wasteland all around. There were piles of twisted metal, broken glass and melted plastic. In fact, everything a busy universe could make. The space-flowers were a touch of life in a vast, throwaway landscape.

But a rumbling sound made the space-flowers tremble. A shadow moved over the rocky world. It was the Garbage Grinder spaceship. The shadow fell on the space-flowers, and the spaceship stopped in the sky. There was a low moan of distant wind. Everything was still.

"Grinder in full stop," said Dumper. "Ready, Skipper."

"Open tipper drum," said Skipper.

The lid of the tipper drum opened with a mechanical groan.

"Tipper drum open," said Dumper. He noticed the space-flowers on the TV screen, but it was too late to worry. They had a job to do.

"Dump the rubbish," said Skipper.

Suddenly, the huge metal drum tipped down. It was like emptying a rubbish bin. A stream of scrap, sludge and filthy junk fell onto the rocky moon. The space-flowers vanished from the TV screen. They were buried in all the rubbish.

"Dumping over," said Dumper.

"Good work," said Skipper. "Back to the Metal Moon."

Dumper started pressing buttons and pulling levers. The Garbage Grinder fired its booster rockets and rumbled back into space. It turned away from the rocky moon, and flew past the colourful planet.

"On our way," said Dumper.

Skipper nodded.

The spaceship dodged an old TV satellite which had gone adrift, and crossed the tail of a comet. The comet circled the other moons. It sparkled with chunks of ice.

The controls were flashing and bleeping in the Garbage Grinder. A glimmering dot appeared on the TV screen. The target clicked on again.

"Locked onto the Metal Moon," said Dumper. He tapped the TV screen with his finger. It made a very sharp tapping sound.

Dumper's finger was metal. So was his body. Dumper and Skipper were robots, and they worked very hard. But Dumper did more than Skipper.

Dumper glanced at Skipper. He was more interested in the window. "Locked-on...Skipper?" asked Dumper. Skipper was in a funny mood.

Skipper was gazing out of the window. "Mmm. Looks kind of beautiful," he said.

"The Metal Moon?" asked Dumper. He glanced at the TV screen.

"No...Multichrome," said Skipper, as he admired the swirling planet. "It could swallow a million moons."

Skipper stared at Dumper, with a sparkle in his eye. "What lies under those swirly clouds?" he asked. "Wonders of the universe..."

"Er...right," said Dumper. But he wasn't sure. His boss had gone a little space-sick. "What about the Metal Moon?" asked Dumper.

"The...what?" mumbled Skipper. He tried to remember his job.

"The rubbish," said Dumper. "There's another six loads."

Skipper blinked his eyes a couple of times. He turned away from the window. "I love dropping rubbish," said Skipper. "What a job. You get to see the sights."

But there was no more time for sightseeing. The Garbage Grinder sped through the darkness of space, straight past a frozen moon. The dot on the TV screen grew bigger and bigger. They were approaching the Metal Moon.

"Fixed onto Sky Sweeper tracking," said Dumper. "Ready for booster burn switch-off."

"You know what to do, Dumper," said Skipper. "I'll just admire the view."

The Metal Moon looked like a gigantic gyroscope, spinning among the stars. It had once been a moon like any other moon, but the place had been built over. There was a huge metal bar through the middle, and a metal ring round the edge. It was covered in greenish clouds.

The Garbage Grinder flew towards the metal ring, which circled the Metal Moon. The ring looked thin from a distance, but it soon filled the spaceship windows. It cast a great, curved shadow onto the Garbage Grinder, as if night had quickly fallen.

Dumper looked up at the metal ring. He could see lights, towers and aerials bristling in the gloom. There were hundreds of cargo starships, being loaded and unloaded. The ring was a massive spaceport.

The Garbage Grinder flew past the edge of the ring, and dropped through the stormy clouds. It was shaken by a rumble of thunder. Lightning flashed all around. The windows were splattered by acid rain, but the spaceship was built to take anything. Dumper switched on the window-wipers, so they could see where they were going.

The clouds cleared suddenly, and the sky was a misty green. Dumper looked at the world below. There were hundreds of factories and towers, which gleamed with company signs. The chimneys belched mounds of black and brown smoke. There was a busy noise which never stopped - chugging, rumbling and whirring.

The Garbage Grinder flew between two enormous buildings, and past some gigantic gearwheels. It landed in a Garbage Grinder Garage, with other Garbage Grinder spaceships. Dumper flipped off the flying controls. The spaceship cooled down for a moment.

"Like some more rubbish?" asked Skipper.

"Sounds like fun," said Dumper.

The Garbage Grinder's drum tilted up. Rubbish poured from a giant nozzle.

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The Metal Moon was a landscape of jagged buildings, towers, bridges and pipes. A tall factory loomed in the distance, not far from the Sludge Canal. It looked like a cathedral made of iron, with spires rising in the sky. Flashes of light shone through the murky windows. Steam made the glass misty.

The factory was a hot and noisy place. The main boiler made power to run the machines. It hissed and spat orange flame. There were vast walls of dials and controls, which hummed and ticked and beeped. They could be reached by thin balconies, and steps which ran up and down.

Big rocket engines moved along a rocket roller. They stopped every few minutes. New pieces were welded on, and parts were bolted into place. The workers had a thousand jobs to do. There were hundreds of workers to do them.

Trundle was one of the worker robots. He worked as hard as he could. Trundle was tall, with a slightly miserable look as if life was a bit too hard.

Trundle was made of rusty brown metal, with strong chunky arms. He used them to lift the heavy tools, and pull the heavy levers. His feet were big and heavy like factory boots. He had a flat metal cap on his head.

Trundle pulled a lever. It worked a huge machine, which worked another huge machine...but he didn't know what that machine did. Then he gripped a big crank handle in the middle of a dial. The handle was stiff, and Trundle turned it hard.

"Ouch...come on!" groaned Trundle. The handle shifted with a metallic squeal. Lights came on round the dial.

Trundle gasped. He leant back on the balcony rail, drained by the effort. Trundle brushed his brow with a big, clamp-like hand.

But somebody was watching Trundle, and they knew he was taking a break. Trundle's picture was on a TV screen, as there were cameras all over the place.

High in the shadows of the factory roof, a speaker crackled into life. "No slacking! No slacking!" said a grating voice. "This shift has two more hours. Keep moving!"

That was the end of Trundle's break, although he'd only taken a moment. Trundle slumped back to work.

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Not every robot on the Metal Moon was working in a factory. The Digital Academy was a robot school, which was shaped like a silver dome. The school had aerials and gadgets on the roof. They whirled and twirled in the sun.

Tweeter went to the Digital Academy, along with many of her friends. It was packed with smaller robots. They all looked a bit like children.

Tweeter was keen on school, especially science. She sat near the front of the class. The black-screen cast a flickering glow on her round, silver face.

Mr. Neuron had a black metal cloak, which spread right down to the ground. He had a square hat with a tassel of wire, and an arm with a built-in stick. Mr. Neuron liked to point at things. He was a robot teacher, after all.

The black-screen was just like a black-board, only it didn't need any chalk. Mr. Neuron tapped the black-screen. Lots of fiddly shapes flashed up. Mr. Neuron traced the details with his pointer arm.

"...and then we come to the great dodecahedron," said Mr. Neuron. "Another in this family of shapes. Of course, there are so many wonderful shapes. That's the beauty of the space-time warp!"

Cog was a shy-looking robot, who sat at the back of the class. Cog found lessons difficult. He scratched his round, metal head.

"So...remember! I'll test you tomorrow," said Mr. Neuron. "I want top, top marks, or else? I'll send you to Mr. Sprockett!"

The school bell rang, and the lesson was over. The class started to leave.

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The factory day was longer than the school day. The rocket roller rumbled on and on, moving the big rocket engines. It stopped every few minutes, so the robots could do their jobs. Cranes swung over the rockets, with powerful welding guns. They made showers of orange sparks.

Kronkite was a worker robot like Trundle, although he was more heavily built. Kronkite was working one of the welding cranes. He gripped a lever in each hand.

Kronkite glanced around, but no-one was looking. He decided to take a break. Kronkite let go of the levers and tramped over to an archway. It wasn't far from the rocket roller. He switched on a tiny TV.

"What's the betting on tonight, Tox?" asked Zim, who was one of the TV voices.

Tox was very sure of himself. "Oh...the Spirals should beat the Rickets ten-nil!" he said. "Never, and I say never, in the history of Wheeli-Ball has a Ricket come back from the brink."

"So the betting's off?" asked Zim.

"No, Zim, I never said that," said Tox. "If Marvel Marlo gets up and running, oh - it could spell 'Disaster' for the Spirals with a capital 'D'. Ten-nil to the Rickets!"

"So you don't know, Tox? Nobody knows?"

"No, I never said that...," said Tox.

While Kronkite was watching the tiny TV, the other robots were hard at work. Stoke was another worker robot, and he was extra busy on a rocket. Stoke was tightening bolts and drilling holes. There was always so much to do.

Stoke glanced at Kronkite. He wasn't doing anything. "Hey, Kronkite!" he yelled. "Get back! Stop lazing around!"

Kronkite looked up. He couldn't wait to leave the factory, and dash home to his big TV. It had a huge picture, with supersonic sound. "Good game tonight, Stoke," said Kronkite. "Fancy a bet?"

"On the money we make?" sighed Stoke. "Forget it!"

There was a movement. Stoke glanced up as something swung overhead. There was no-one in charge of Kronkite's welding crane. It hit a balcony with a shower of sparks.

"Kronkite! It's out of control!" yelled Stoke.

Kronkite switched off his tiny TV. "Okay. The expert's on his way," he said.

Stoke ran over to the control panel. He hit a red emergency button. The welding crane drooped, and the sparks fizzled out. Kronkite plodded over to Stoke.

"It's fine now," said Stoke.

"You don't need me?" asked Kronkite.

"Get working!" said Stoke. "We've got another rocket to build!"

Kronkite shrugged his shoulders. Some robots were never happy. He took the controls of the welding crane, ready for more welding.

"Don't worry, Stoke," said Kronkite. "The expert's here.

"Yeah. And I'm doing all the work!" said Stoke.

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The sun was low in the Metal Moon's sky. The sky was green and smoky. It was always smoky on the Metal Moon. It was a smoky kind of place.

The doors of the Digital Academy opened. The robot kids streamed out. They yelled, chased each other and played with hoops, pop-guns and skateboards.

Tweeter crossed the yard ahead of the crowd. She had a pink back-pack, which matched her pink paintwork. A ball bounced off her gold metal head. She wagged a silver finger.

"Careful, Ratchit!" said Tweeter. She thought the others were pretty stupid.

Ratchit made a rude noise. He thought Tweeter was far too clever. Ratchit preferred games to the classroom. He dashed off with the ball.

But a small, tubby figure struggled out of the crowd. "Hey, Tweeter!" it called. It was Cog. Tweeter looked back. "What is it, Cog?" she said. "I want to get home."

Cog caught up at his slow, waddling pace. He looked like a little boy, in blue shorts and a T-shirt. There were two cog wheels on his chest, which turned very slowly. Cog had a shy but friendly manner, though he didn't have many friends. The others were quicker, or cleverer.

"Did you get all those shapes...in class?" asked Cog.

Tweeter tapped her head. "Every one," she said. "I'm a genius."

"Wow!" said Cog. He was amazed. "There was a square, wasn't there? And a triangle?" Cog traced the shapes in the air.

"And a great dodecahedron," said Tweeter.

"Huh? A do-dee-dunki-decki-dum-dum?" sighed Cog. "I can't even say the name."

"So...?" asked Tweeter. She turned away.

"Come on, Tweeter," said Cog. "You've got to help me." Cog waddled after Tweeter. "I'm bottom of the class. If I fail this test, well...it's off to Mr. Sprockett."

Tweeter laughed at the idea. "Who's afraid of Mr. Sprockett?" she asked.

"I am," said Cog.

Tweeter was fed up with Cog. She walked through the school gates, but Cog chased after her. "Come on, Tweeter!" squeaked Cog. "You're top of the class." His cog wheels started spinning faster. They did this when he was excited.

Cog was a tubby little robot, but he could move quickly when he wanted to. Cog skipped in front of Tweeter, so she couldn't get past. "Share a bit, will you?" he squeaked. "Just a couple of shapes. Just so I don't stay bottom."

Tweeter stopped. "So what if I do?" she asked. "What's in it for me?"

Cog had to think hard. "Uh...well...I'll give you something great," he said. "Yeah! Something you've always wanted!"

Tweeter was a girl robot, but she loomed over Cog. She wanted a straight answer. "Like?"

"Like...one of my best toys!" said Cog. His cog wheels stopped spinning. He must have been right.

This time, Tweeter did the hard thinking. "Hmm. Better make it a good one," she said.

"I will," said Cog.

"Okay. Want to be a genius?" asked Tweeter.

"Sure!" said Cog.

Tweeter nodded. "Let's go to the Play Park..."

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The sun dropped low in the Metal Moon sky. It was tinted an oily green. The chimneys puffed clouds of stinking smoke, like giant cigarettes.

There were some straggly birds sitting on a big metal cone. It was high on the factory roof. Suddenly, there was a grinding sound. The birds flapped off in fright. The cone began rising, and slots opened in the sides. It blasted an almighty wail of noise.

'Eeeooowww!!!'

The birds had been sitting on a giant siren.

All over the factory, robot hands were dropping tools. They made lots of clanging sounds. The sky was growing dark through the overhead skylights. Greenish sunbeams sliced through the windows.

Trundle was glad to stop work at last, but he was too tired to rush anywhere. He just stood for a moment, watching everyone else. Dozens of robots struggled along the balconies. They were keen to get home.

But someone could see Trundle on a TV screen, and a speaker crackled into life. "No waiting! No waiting!" said the grating voice. "This shift is over. Keep moving!"

Trundle sighed. He dropped his big, heavy spanner. They moaned, whatever he did. Trundle trudged along beside the rocket roller. It was now silent and still.

The repair bay was under a low, metal archway. It was where faulty engine parts were fixed. Trundle spotted another robot, who was still at work. "Hey, Reckner!" he called. "It's home. I think we've earned it!"

Reckner lifted his chunky head. He was a big, heavy robot, of an earlier type than Trundle. Reckner had huge grippers, and wheels instead of legs. His voice had an old but humorous tone.

"No worries, Trundle," said Reckner. "Finish the job! Never leave a bad rocket."

Trundle nodded. "You're a hard worker."

Reckner had a headlamp built into his cap, so he could see into dark corners. He peered at the part he was fixing. "Pah! These motors are terrible!" said Reckner. "They don't make 'em like they used to."

Reckner was a funny old robot, but Trundle liked him a lot. "I'm sure you're right," said Trundle.

Reckner put down the rocket part. There were piles of parts all over the place, some big, some small, some tiny. They all looked tricky to fix.

"I was listening to the main boiler," said Reckner. "Put my ear to the side. The whole thing was rumbling. I told 'em it was dangerous."

This didn't sound good to Trundle, but he didn't want to worry. "It must be okay," he said.

"They just don't care," said Reckner. "Whole thing could blow up, like that!" Reckner banged his wangle-spanner on the workbench.

Trundle shivered. It was a scary idea, but he didn't think it could happen. "Come on, Reckner," he said. "You can't work all night."

Reckner sighed. He loved his work, but Trundle was right. Reckner switched off his headlamp.

Dozens of worker robots swarmed through the factory gates, some strolling, some speedy, some slow. Trundle plodded along near the back of the crowd. Kronkite caught up with him.

"Hey, Trundle! Fancy the Wheeli-Ball tonight?" asked Kronkite. "Rickets are gonna get splattered!"

Trundle stopped, and stretched his arms. "My joints ache thinking about it, Kronkite," he said. "I've been grinding metal. Need to switch off."

Kronkite didn't want to listen. "We just watch, Trundle. No big deal. Maybe we could start a team..."

Trundle groaned. "No way."

"Yeah, come on!" said Kronkite. "Zero Rockets versus the Atom Smashers!"

"My armchair's waiting," said Trundle.

"Just a thought," said Kronkite. He shrugged his shoulders and wandered off.

Trundle sighed. He'd done nothing but work, work, work. Kronkite had been watching his tiny TV.

Another robot had worked even harder than Trundle, or any of the others. Reckner rolled out of the factory, and stretched his heavy metal arms.

Reckner looked up at the dirty sky, which was growing darker and darker. It was murky green, with murky brown clouds. But it still made him smile.

The sun was low on the horizon. It was a green, glowing circle, which was sliced by the factory chimneys. The sun was framed by the filthy smoke. It was always rising in the sky.

Suddenly, a robot kid shot up in the air. He was waving his arms and squealing. He dropped down again, then shot up again. He was having a lot of fun. The kid was bouncing on a sonic trampoline, which made a very strange sound. This kept him bobbing in the air.

There was lots of fun in the Play Park. There were climbing frames, roundabouts and slides. But the play things were played with a lot, and some of the things were broken. Dull metal walls loomed around the park. They were scrawled with robot graffiti.

Tweeter and Cog were sitting on a low wall, by a border of plastic plants. "Okay, Tweeter - make me a genius!" said Cog. "I wanna draw a do-deca-deca-deca...square."

Cog tried to trace the shape in the air, but he mucked it up and did a square. The dodecahedron was far too tricky. He was useless at shapes, after all.

Tweeter smiled. She was brilliant at shapes. "Easy!" said Tweeter. Cog closed his eyes. Tweeter stuck her finger in his ear.

There was a bleeping sound. The wheels on Cog's chest began to turn faster. There was more bleeping, and a humming noise. The wheels were spinning backwards and forwards.

The noises stopped. The wheels stopped spinning. Tweeter pulled her finger out. "There you go," she said. "You're a genius!"

"Wow!" said Cog. He tried thinking, but it didn't seem any different. He didn't know how it felt to be a genius, but a genius couldn't know everything.

Tweeter wagged a finger like she was Cog's teacher. "But don't tell Mr. Neuron I helped you."

"I won't," said Cog, "or it's off to Mr. Sprockett!"

Tweeter nodded. Cog had the idea.

Cog stood, and stretched his metal arms and legs. He couldn't sit still for long. Cog glanced across the Play Park. He'd done enough work today.

"Where you going?" asked Tweeter.

"A robot's gotta have fun!" smiled Cog.

"What sort of fun?" asked Tweeter.

Cog ran across the Play Park, past the sonic trampoline. He reached a huge climbing frame. It was a giant tree made of metal, with loops and spirals in the branches. Cog had never dared to climb it before, but today was a very special day.

Tweeter waved at Cog. "Bye, Cog!" she called. "Don't get stuck!"

"Don't worry," yelled Cog. "I'm a genius!"

Tweeter shook her head. "Doh!"

The climbing frame was extra-tricky. Tweeter had never climbed to the top. It was built like a metal maze, and it was harder to climb down than up. Kids were always getting stuck up there. Cog would learn the hard way.

Tweeter was clever, but she wasn't a genius - so Cog wasn't a genius, either. Could a genius climb a climbing frame? Tweeter didn't think so. They must have better things to do...

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The sky darkened over the Metal Moon. Stars twinkled through the gaps in the clouds, but there were never many gaps. A rocket tram zoomed along a metal track between the vast, looming factories.

Trundle was hanging onto a strap like many other robots, as the rocket tram took them home. Buildings rushed past the windows in a flicker of shadows and light. The signal lamps shone green for 'GO!'

The tram made a sharp right turn, and the floor tilted sideways. Trundle and the other robots were bumped around. The tram made a sharp left turn, and the floor tilted sideways. The robots were bumped around some more. The rocket tram dodged another rocket tram, which was coming the other way. Trundle was still hanging onto the strap. He swayed gently to and fro.

"What a grind," said Trundle. It was always a bother, going to work in the morning, then coming home at night. The rocket trams were fast and furious. But they were jam-packed at rush hour.

Trundle decided to forget where he was. He opened a copy of *The Industrial Echo*. It was a newspaper made from silver foil, with all the latest stories.

The front page was covered in robot writing. There was a picture of the Metal Moon, and some news about the Garbage Grinders. Trundle started to read, but it was pretty dull stuff. They were running out of space to dump rubbish.

Trundle didn't have long to think. The rocket tram had a speaker, just like the rocket factory. It gave a warning in a deep, throaty voice. "Mind the gap!"

The voice wasn't joking, and the robots knew it. They held the straps even tighter. The rocket tram zoomed off the end of the track, and over a deep, black hole. The sides dropped away like two metal cliffs. Trundle could hear the whistling of the wind, and the roar of the rocket engines.

"Wait for the bump!" said another robot. Everyone held on tight. The rocket tram landed on the next piece of track. The robots were bounced around.

"What a gap," said Trundle. He glanced at the newspaper, but it was far too miserable. Trundle turned to the sports page. What about the Wheeli-Ball? Who would win...the Rickets or the Spirals?

It was the last sunlight Trundle would see that day. The rocket tram shot into a tunnel, and rumbled into the darkness. The tip of the sun slid below the horizon. The sky turned a deep, oily green.

The rocket tram shot out of the tunnel. It streaked through a City Zone. There were not so many factories, but the buildings were still massive. Neon signs flashed with company badges, and squiggles of robot writing.

The robots knew the journey all too well. The jump across the gap had been bad enough, but the tram had more bumps in store. "Hold on tight. Going up!" said the throaty voice.

The robots did what it said. They grabbed the straps, and held them very, very tight. It couldn't be tight enough, thought Trundle.

The track was getting steeper and steeper, like part of a rollercoaster. The city lights dropped past the windows. The rocket engines fired full blast, so the rocket tram shot up the slope.

Trundle still had his copy of *The Industrial Echo*. He wouldn't stop reading for anything...even all this bumping around. Trundle's face was pressed against the sports page, so he was eye-to-eye with the Spot the Wheeli-Ball coupon. I can't spot the Wheeli-Ball, thought Trundle. I've done this competition week after week, and never won a brass penny.

The rocket tram shot off the ramp like a big firework. It flew into the green, starry sky. But there was more than one rocket tram. There were thousands, all over the Metal Moon. There were millions of robot workers, and they all had to get home.

Trundle's rocket tram joined a fleet of six, which were all rising in the sky. They roared past a floating airship as they headed for greater heights.

Trundle glanced through the window. There was a gigantic shape looming in the sky, and growing larger all the time. It was a suburban saucer, where Trundle and his family lived.

The saucer was hanging from a huge framework, which was made of metal girders. They made an amazing criss-cross pattern. The framework stretched right into space, where it joined the Metal Moon's metal ring.

There were lights around the rim of the suburban saucer. Each was a different home, with a different family of robots. There were many suburban saucers hanging in the sky. They faded into the distance, and became lost in the evening mist. Each had a fleet of rocket trams, which shuttled up and down.

Trundle folded his copy of *The Industrial Echo*. "Nothing in the news," he said.

A giant shadow crossed the rocket tram as it flew below the suburban saucer. The saucer was peppered with tunnels, which were circled by rings of light. The trams popped into the tunnels, one by one, and landed back on the rails. Trundle's rocket tram did the same. It rumbled on its way.

The tunnels weaved through the suburban saucer. The rocket tram rattled to a halt. The doors slid open with a hiss of steam. "Crankshaft Road," said the throaty voice.

Some of the robots stumbled out, including Trundle. It was a gloomy station, apart from the posters on the wall - and even these were tattered and torn. There was one for a sunny seaside world, with a blue sky and yellow beach. It was a long way from the Metal Moon. Trundle knew he could never go there.

"Oh, well. Nearly home," said Trundle. He strolled down the platform, a little behind the others.

There was a rumble as the rocket tram moved on. It vanished into the tunnel. The rockets lit the tunnel in a blue, ghostly light, before they faded into darkness. A breeze blew some litter across the platform. Then the station was silent and empty.

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The Metal Moon was spinning in space. The stars twinkled like gems. A comet shot past with a swooping sound, and left a wispy trail of smoke. There was a burst of urgent music. Words appeared in chunky robot lettering.

"The top stories! The top names!" said a smooth, slick voice. "The top means the top on Top News Tonight, top of the top news triangle!" The picture switched to the Top News studio, and the star of the show. The picture flickered a bit as he spoke.

"Good evening. I'm Chrome Hardy," said Chrome.

"And I'm Stella Sheen," said Stella.

"With the shining Top News team," said Chrome. The music reached a final beat, and ended suddenly.

Chrome Hardy flashed a tinny smile at the audience. Then he started the top news. "Top news on Top News," he said. "Metal Moon toxic sludge hits tip-top levels. New dump moon needed, says top corporation." The TV showed a Garbage Grinder dumping sludge on a rocky moon.

"And Vick Void wins Silver Voicebox at the Synthetic Voice Awards," added Stella. "Vick puts his top voice down to the right electrical contacts!" She was glad of something more cheerful.

But Stella wasn't so lucky. Her face was getting fuzzy, and her voice was drowned in a hiss. There was a thump. The picture cleared for a second. But it soon went fuzzy again.

Toggle stood by the TV set. She was feeling a little annoyed. Toggle was a rather tubby robot, with bright green paintwork. She looked like a lady with curlers in her hair. Toggle whacked the top of the TV set. The picture cleared again.

Toggle wasn't bothered about the TV. It was never any good. "Enough fuzzy logic, dear," said Toggle. "Nice day?"

Trundle was sitting in his armchair, with The Industrial Echo beside him. He liked reading the paper, but it was easier to watch TV.

Trundle thought about the question. "This is the best bit," he said. Trundle slumped back in his armchair with a metallic creak. He was always tired in the evening.

Toggle spotted the newspaper. It had the sports page on the back. "You haven't done Spot the Wheeli-Ball," she said, as she looked at the competition. Trundle always did Spot the Wheeli-Ball.

"I can't spot it," said Trundle. He never won.

Toggle picked up the newspaper. She peered at the Wheeli-Ball coupon. There was a photo of two robots swinging Wheeli-Ball clubs, although the sky was painted white. There was a big 'X' to one side, and a lot of blurb.

"You must have a go, Trundle!" said Toggle. She read the blurb aloud. "Big jackpot...rollover win."

"Haven't won yet," groaned Trundle.

But Toggle wasn't having any groaning. She took a pen, and guided Trundle's hand across the Wheeli-Ball coupon. "Do it together. Let's put it...here!" she said. Toggle marked an 'X' in the most unlikely spot.

"No chance," said Trundle.

Toggle cut out the coupon with her robot fingers. They were sharp enough to snip the paper. "Can't win if you don't enter," she said. Trundle knew this was true. But Toggle was a dreamer. It didn't mean they would win.

Toggle was so busy snipping, and Trundle doing nothing, that they didn't hear the turn of a key. "Hi, Mom! Dad!" said Tweeter, as she peeped round the door.

Toggle looked up with a scowl. She'd been worried about Tweeter. "What's the time? It's late," she said. "Trundle's been back for ages."

Tweeter took off her pink rucksack. "I was...helping the genius," she said. Tweeter walked off to her bedroom.

Toggle tapped her head. "Kids!" she groaned. But no-one took any notice.

* * * * *

The Metal Moon blazed with a million lights. It seemed like the place never slept. The stars shone between the clouds of smoke. There was a flicker of lightning, high in the sky.

Tweeter's bedroom was a cosy, colourful place, with toys, plants and twisting mobiles. The bed was covered in golden foil, which kept Tweeter warm at night. Tweeter watered a blue cactus with tender loving care.

Maybe the TV had Top News Tonight, but Trundle was dozing in his armchair. He was lit by the flickers of the TV screen.

There was a burst of music, but Trundle didn't wake up. He was missing the show he wanted to see. There was the roar of an enormous crowd. The TV voices tried to talk sense.

"It looked incredible for a moment," said Tox, "but the Spirals have knocked the Rickets for sure. It's all over for the little guys, and manager Dom Tonsil will have to face the fans tomorrow. He won't be smiling much longer..."

"Sure, Tox," said Zim, the other TV voice. "But don't you reckon there's the chance of a comeback?"

"No way. I'd rest my reputation!" said Tox. The voices carried on gabbling.

Toggle smiled at Trundle, and switched the TV off. Trundle woke up with a start. "Wha...! What was that?" he said, blinking at the sudden silence.

"Relax, darling," said Toggle.

"You woke me up," said Trundle.

"How can you snooze through that?" sighed Toggle. "Don't worry, I'll post your Wheeli-Ball coupon."

Toggle showed Trundle the envelope, which was ready to post. It had a first-class space mail stamp. "Factory needs a scrub," said Toggle. She scrubbed it every night.

Toggle kissed Trundle with a clank of metal. She stepped towards the door.

Suddenly, the telephone rang. Toggle picked it up. "Hello?" she said. "Who? What was that?"

Toggle shook her head. She was a little puzzled. Toggle turned to look at Trundle. "Do we know...the genius?" she asked.

Trundle looked at her, blankly. He didn't know the answer.

Somebody knew the genius. They knew him very well. There was a family of robots just like Cog, who lived a few streets round the bend. All the streets were bendy on the suburban saucer. It was a bendy kind of place.

Cog's mom Cogette had the telephone. His dad Chug stood beside her. His brothers Clunk and Choke stood beside Chug, and tried to grab the phone. The robots were all jiggling and twitching, so the cogs on their chests were spinning fast.

Cogette spoke to the others. "She's asking about the genius."

"Cog's a real genius," said Chug. His voice was a slow drawl.

"But he can't find his way home," said Cogette. "Not much of a genius."

"Gets it all from me," said Chug, proudly.

"Afraid so," said Cogette.

Toggle fetched Tweeter from her bedroom, and led her to the phone. "Uh...hi, Mrs. Cog," said Tweeter. "I think I know what's happened..."

"Name's Cog-ette, little lady," came the frosty reply. "Now, where's my robot?"

* * * * *

Cog could hear the sound of a siren. Help was on its way. The Crisis Crew skyship roared overhead, and dropped down towards the Play Park.

The skyship switched on its searchlights. They flicked up and down the climbing frame. The searchlights settled on Cog, who was clinging to the top.

"Hang on. That's an official order," blared a megaphone.

Cog didn't need an order. He was hanging on for dear life. "Yessir! I obey!" he yelled.

Meanwhile, Tweeter and Trundle were glued to the TV screen. They were both enjoying the show. "Great telly, Dad," said Tweeter. "Come on, Cog!" They could see Cog on the TV screen, clinging to the climbing frame.

Toggle lifted her arms. "Good gracious!" she said. How could they find it fun?

The TV picture moved closer to Cog, as he was being filmed from the skyship. A grabber dropped down and clamped round Cog. It tugged him lightly, but he wouldn't let go.

"Let go, genius!" blared the megaphone.

"Okay, okay!" said Cog.

Cog released his grip, and the Play Park dropped away. He was lifted high in the sky.

"They've got him!" smiled Tweeter.

As Tweeter and Trundle watched the TV pictures, a badge flashed over the scene. Then they heard Chrome Hardy's smooth, slick voice. "Another great rescue from the Crisis Crew," said Chrome. "They're quick, they're cheap, they're just a call away!"

Toggle pulled away from the TV. She grabbed an enormous mop. "Thank goodness," said Toggle. "I'd better get to work."

* * * * *

The Crisis Crew skyship was bright orange, with a yellow flame painted on the side. It had cranes, grabbers and ladders for different kinds of rescue. One of the grabbers pulled Cog aboard.

The skyship turned away from the Play Park. It flew over the rooftops of the suburban saucer, and headed for Crankshaft Street.

Cog glanced out of the hatch. He was amazed at the view below. He could see the Play Park, his home...even the Digital Academy. They were all part of the suburban saucer, which was hanging in the sky. The factories were far below, on the surface of the Metal Moon.

"Wow!" yelled Cog. "I've never been so high!" He tried to lean out of the hatch, but a metal arm pulled him back.

"Don't fall out," said a Crisis Crew robot. "We don't want another crisis."

Toggle was down in the street, near the rocket tram station. She had the envelope with the Wheeli-Ball coupon. Toggle was just about to post it, but she could hear the hum of jets. Toggle looked up at the sky.

The Crisis Crew skyship flew overhead. Its lights had stopped flashing now the crisis was over. The grabber lowered Cog into his back yard, and rose into the hatch. The hatch closed.

Toggle could imagine how happy Cogette would be, even if she moaned at Cog. But Cog was safe...that was the main thing.

The skyship vanished behind the roof of a building, and the jets faded in the distance. The street was quiet again. Toggle nodded. She was happy.

But would they Spot the Wheeli-Ball? Only one way to find out. Toggle dropped the envelope into the post box. Then she walked along to the station.

The rocket tram shot out of a tunnel, straight into the cloudy sky. It dropped away from the suburban saucer. The Metal Moon was far below.

Toggle wasn't so keen on The Industrial Echo, but she still liked to read. She had a book of robot love stories, with a steel heart on the cover. It took her to a world of robot princes, knights and adventures. Toggle hardly noticed the lights of the Metal Moon, as they rose through the windows.

There were lots of robots on the rocket tram, all heading for the rocket factory. Moppit had a mop, just like Toggle. She chatted to the others. "Did you see that kid on TV? Crazy! There's some nutty robots around."

Another cleaning robot nodded. "What was he called? Cog-face?"

The robots laughed. "Don't think so, Ida," said Moppit.

Toggle blinked. She knew who they meant. They were talking about the genius. Toggle didn't want to mention Tweeter, in case she got the blame. Toggle sank behind her storybook, and hoped nobody would notice.

The rocket tram dropped towards the Metal Moon. It landed on a curve of track. Toggle was soon streaking through the City Zone, with its hundreds of flashing signs.

The factories loomed in the distance, like a range of craggy mountains. Wheels turned and smoke belched. It was a busy place to be.

* * * * *

The factory where Trundle worked was dark, silent and empty. The dials were at zero. The pistons and wheels were still. Even so, there was a slurping sound, a squelch, then another slurp.

A blobby shape wriggled out of a drain. It was like a lump of jelly, and cast a blobby shadow on the wall. "Delicioussshhh," hissed the blob, as it slithered over to an oily puddle. It began to slurp the oil.

Suddenly, there was a hum of electric power. "Blasst it!" hissed the blob. One of the factory lights came on, then another and another. They lit the walls of the factory, and the arched ceiling high above.

Dinnertime was over, thought the blob. It wriggled down another drain. The slurping sound faded away.

A fanfare filled the factory with electric trumpets. They faded into soft, moody music. The place had a magical feel.

A silver voice drifted from high above. It echoed around the walls. "Turn on, tune in to The Vick Void Show!" it said. "And thanks to all on the Metal Moon who voted me Silver Voicebox of the Year!"

The robot cleaning crew entered the factory, with Toggle marching at the front. They made a circle in the middle of the big metal floor.

"Mops ready!" said Toggle.

All the robots held up their mops. They were ready to sweep into action. The place really needed it, thought Toggle. Just look at that oily trail, right across the floor. Something had been slurping in the puddles.

Some of the mops were extra-special. They flipped out mini-mops for tricky corners. But the robots didn't start cleaning at once. They were listening to the Vick Void show.

"From Sandrax, Orpiloop to Yovil," said the smooth voice of the radio star, "the best planets get the best sounds. Here's one for you hard, hard workers. Jill Jiver and the Emerald Cosmos!"

The music changed to a catchy beat, with the strange sounds of an alien singer.

This was the moment. "Let's clean!" said Toggle.

The robots began to move in a swirling pattern, sweeping their mops in graceful curves. They were wiping a shape in the dirty floor. It looked like a huge flower with big, round petals. The cameras could see it from the ceiling, although none of the robots could.

Ida passed Toggle in the middle of the dance. "I wonder what Vick Void looks like?" she gasped. "He's got such a lovely voice!"

"Mmm. I wonder...," sighed Toggle.

The robots slowed to a stop as the music ended. They gazed up at the radio voice.

"Mmm! Now, let's voyage to the tropical jungles of Orinjono," said Vick, "with the punk bongo drum band, The Shunters."

Bizarre bongo music played over the distant speakers. The robots started bobbing with their mops - but this time, they didn't bother cleaning. Dancing was a lot more fun.

However, somebody had a very good view. He was looking at a TV screen. It was one of many TV screens, showing different parts of the factory.

Gaffer looked a lot like Trundle, but he was more than just a worker. Gaffer bossed the workers around. There was a metal panel on the front of his body, which looked like a tie. The grille under his nose was like a small, fussy moustache.

Gaffer was not pleased with the cleaning robots, so he flipped up a switch. There was a crackle, and the music stopped. The robots froze in the middle of their dance, mops in the air, arms waving, legs kicking.

Gaffer spoke into a microphone, so his voice grated over the speakers. His own voice was very quiet, but Gaffer liked to feel powerful. "That's enough from the Vick Void Show," he said. "It's the Vick Void No-Show from now. Get working."

Toggle shrugged her shoulders. The robots went back to work. They mopped and scrubbed in a slow, sad way.

High in his control room, Gaffer was pleased with himself. He nodded at the TV picture. They were obeying his orders now. "Always trouble with the night shift," he said. "Lazy robots!"

Gaffer slid his chair back from the TV screens. He put his feet up on the controls. Time for a little snooze, he thought.

Gaffer put his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes. He didn't have to scrub the factory.

The Digital Academy was shaped like a dome, with a square roof perched on the top. The roof was covered in aials and gadgets, like delicate metal flowers. They whirred and wobbled in the gentle breeze. It was the start of another busy day.

The blinds on the windows opened and sunshine streamed into the classrooms. The pot-plants opened their plastic leaves, as the light gleamed on their solar cells.

Mr. Neuron stood in front of the class. "So...who's a genius today?" he asked.

The class laughed.

Cog was sitting at his desk. He was shaking with shyness. It was hard being a TV star, even for one night only.

Tweeter came to the rescue. She shot up her hand. "Sir...I'm a genius!" said Tweeter.

Jett was a lanky, cheeky robot who never did any work. He liked to be the class clown, and this was a good excuse for clowning.

"Teacher's pet!" yelled Jett. "Where's the climbing frame, Cog?" Jett waved his arms wildly, like he was climbing hard. The other robots cheered him on.

"Quiet!" said Mr. Neuron. He tapped his pointer arm on the desk. "No adventures in study time. Set an example, Tweeter..."

Tweeter stood, and walked primly to the black-screen at the front of the room. Some of the class jeered.

"Goody-goody!" said one of the robots.

"What a creep!" said another.

Mr. Neuron swished his pointer arm. The squiggles on the screen vanished like chalk. "It's all yours, Tweeter. Show us the shapes!" he said. "Show us the marvels of space geometry!"

"Sure, Mr. Neuron," said Tweeter. "Look at this!"

Tweeter stuck her finger into a socket, and turned to her audience. She knew they would be amazed by the shape on the black-screen. It was very, very tricky. But the class were smiling and sniggering.

Tweeter frowned. What was so funny? She looked at the screen. There were no marvels of science, just a wobbly square.

"Nice one, Tweeter!" said Jett.

The class laughed. All except Cog.

"Uh...that's just for starters!" said Tweeter. She was feeling very confused. "How about this...or this?" Two more shapes appeared: a wonky circle and a teetering triangle.

"You're a genius, Tweeter!" said Jett.

"Yeah!" said Cog. "That's a do-dodgi-dunki-decki-dodo."

The class laughed. All except Tweeter.

Mr. Neuron slid forward and scowled at Tweeter. But she already knew what he would say.

"Off to Mr. Sprockett!" said Tweeter.

Mr. Neuron looked at Cog.

"Me, too?" asked Cog.

Mr. Neuron didn't say anything. Even Cog knew the answer to that.

* * * * *

Mr. Sprockett's office was down a grey, empty corridor. It was the big heavy door at the end. None of the robots went near except for a dare...and very few dared to dare. But Cog and Tweeter didn't have any choice. They'd been ordered by Mr. Neuron.

The door opened a crack, and Tweeter and Cog came out. There was an electronic growl as the door slammed shut.

"That wasn't so bad," said Cog. His brain had pictured Mr. Sprockett as a terrible robot, ten times worse than he was.

Tweeter didn't agree with Cog. She'd thought he'd be twice as nice. "But fifty chores...for cheating!" she said.

"We can always cheat some more," said Cog.

But Tweeter was still very annoyed. "Hey, Cog...I just thought of something," she said. "Okay, I got your brainwaves instead of you getting mine. But I did you a favour. You still owe me."

Cog blinked his eyes. "I do...?"

"Yeah!" said Tweeter.

Cog tried to think. "But what?" he asked.

Tweeter tapped him on the tummy. "Your best toy, like you said!"

* * * * *

The TV had a picture of a Wheeli-Ball game, but the picture was very fuzzy. The wheeli-ball was nearly invisible, and the players weren't a lot better. The TV voices were going wild, as it was a very exciting game

"This is totally unbelievable!" said Zim. "Never in the history of Wheeli-Ball...the Rickets are back from the brink! Tox, you said it couldn't happen. Tox, you said it was impossible..."

"I never said that," said Tox.

"You've been saying it for a week, Tox," said Zim. "The Spirals are spinning nowhere!" Zim was fed up with Tox and his stupid sayings. He didn't know anything about Wheeli-Ball.

But the voices went fuzzy. The picture jumped. Trundle was bashing the TV. There was a sudden spark, a puff of smoke, and the TV conked out for good.

Trundle shook his head. "Oh no," he groaned. "Not another one..."

Tweeter stood out in the tiny yard. She watched Trundle chuck the broken TV on a pile of other TVs. "Oh no!" she smiled. "Not another one!"

Trundle shrugged his shoulders. So what? It was an old TV anyway. He'd found it down in the junk yard, so he could always find another. But what about this evening? They couldn't just stare at the wall.

"Make me own entertainment," said Trundle.

There was an old rubber ball by the iron shed. Trundle kicked it weakly round the yard. This was a lot more fun than Wheeli-Ball...or fuzzy TV Wheeli-Ball, at least.

Tweeter tackled Trundle, but he soon had the ball again. "Magic!" yelled Trundle, as he kicked the ball away. Toggle peeped round the back door. The rubber ball bounced off her head.

The yard was just one of hundreds of yards, and hundreds of robot homes. There were rows and rows of metal streets, on the edge of the suburban saucer. It was held up by the huge framework, which stretched high into the clouds.

* * * * *

The sky was blue. It was the bluest blue that Tweeter had ever seen. The leaves of a palm tree rippled in the breeze, and a fluffy cloud floated in the air.

Tweeter was still enjoying the sandy beach. She was thinking about her adventures. "So that's our home on the Metal Moon," she said. "But where's Rota? He won't come down."

Tweeter called up towards the palm leaves. "Come on, Rota! It's not clever! I can't wait all day!" But it didn't do any good.

Tweeter sighed. Never mind, she thought. Rota was Rota...and he was just being silly. She could just ignore him.

"I made sure Cog stuck to the deal," said Tweeter. "But as for his best toy..."

* * * * *

Tweeter stood in the Play Park, looking at the toy. She couldn't really miss it, as Cog was holding it under her nose. He was making her go cross-eyed.

"It's terrible!" said Tweeter. "It's the worst thing ever!" It was an action figure of a robot soldier, which had seen a bit too much action. The paint was flaking off, and the plastic was dented.

"Look...you can turn his head," said Cog.

"I'll turn yours, Cog," said Tweeter. "Spin it round! I want a better toy than that, or I won't help you cheat at the chores."

Cog sighed. First, it was trouble on the climbing frame, then trouble at school. Now it was trouble with Tweeter. If the school had given prizes for getting into trouble, Cog would have won a few. But they didn't.

* * * * *

The Shopping Zone of the Metal Moon was a busy, busy, place. It was right down on the surface, not far from the City Zone. Huge superstores towered over the busy streets, with busy traffic and busy robots. There were visiting aliens bustling along, buying this and that before flying off. The lizards and blobs could breathe the filthy air, but the rest wore pollution-proof helmets.

One of the brightest shops in the Shopping Zone was shaped like a huge pile of bricks. The bottom floor was a huge red brick as big as a hundred houses, with a blue brick in the middle and a yellow brick on top. The shop hoped to add a green brick one day.

It was easy to see what was sold here. There was a giant doll on top of the roof, with a neon speech bubble coming out of her mouth. It said 'Joy-Toys' in robot writing.

Three robots stood together in the middle of the toy shop. They were sleeker than Trundle's family. The robots were light blue, with silver trim, and made a lot of fuss. They were Litho, Lucid and Lockit.

"Mmmm. I don't know," said Litho. "Are you sure? Are you really sure? Is that really what you want, Lockit?"

Lockit looked like a very clever schoolboy, with a cap on his head. He had round eyes like spectacles. Lockit was holding a big, golden box. It was something very expensive.

Lockit looked up at Litho and Lucid. "Just what I want, Daddy," he nodded. "Four toys in one."

Mr. Trinket worked in the toy shop, along with many other robots. He even looked a bit like a toy - although he was a real robot, not a toy one. But the shop liked its robots to look the part, even if they hated doing so.

Mr. Trinket had bright paintwork like he was made of bricks. He slid forward on his brightly-coloured wheels, which were made to make him wobble.

Mr. Trinket spoke in a dull, dry voice. "These construction kits are wonderful, Master Lockit," he said. "I built myself a new hatstand."

"I won't be building hatstands," said Lockit.

Lockit pointed at the lid of the box, which had pictures of mechanical creatures. He read the lettering aloud. "'You can build a SnapiKat, a SonicSnail, a GyroFish or a DinoSlug'."

Lucid leant forward, and read the small print. "'Kit contains parts for ONE pet ONLY'."

"Oh. What does that mean?" asked Lockit.

"You've got to break your SnapiKat to make a DinoSlug," said Litho.

"I don't wanna break my DinoSlug!" whined Lockit. He was very hard to please, and even harder to spoil. But his family tried very, very hard.

The toy shop was an enormous place. There were six floors in every brick, which came to eighteen. If they ever added the green brick, it would be twenty-four.

Cog had been looking around for ages. He was getting very tired. He only had a few pennies, but everything was so expensive.

Cog had seen water pistols, jigsaws, cuddly planets, wheeli-balls, spiral sparklers and luminous yo-yos. Tweeter wanted the best toy ever. So what could it be?

Cog was nearly at the top of the shop, on a floor full of mechanical marvels. There were model robots made of metal which walked along, and wind-up rocket trams. Cog's eyes whirled in amazement. He wished he had toys like these.

"Uh-oh!" gasped Cog, as he turned a corner. There was the Litho family, looking at the model kits. He couldn't afford anything like that. Cog jumped behind a rack of clockwork spaceships, hoping they hadn't seen him. After waiting a second or two, Cog peered over the top and listened.

Mr. Trinket was trying to make the sale, although his voice was still very dull. "I made a very fine hatstand, Mr. Litho," he said.

"Forget it," snapped Litho. "Do a deal on four of these kits? Kid wants four pets, he can make 'em." Litho knew how to buy and sell. He didn't need Mr. Trinket.

Mr. Trinket hummed and shuffled a bit. "Four for the price of three, sir?" he asked.

"Here's my plastic," said Litho. He pulled a credit card from a slot in his chest.

"Money talks, Mr. Litho!" said Mr. Trinket.

Cog was still hiding behind the rack of toys. He saw Mr. Trinket disappear behind the counter, and return with a pile of kits. "Gosh," whispered Cog. "Look at all those..."

"Catch, son," said Litho.

Mr. Trinket dropped the kits quickly, one by one, into Lockit's eager hands. Lockit tottered to the left and right. He was a little unbalanced with the extra weight.

Lucid touched the rim of her robotic head. It was just like a big, round hat. "Talking of hats, I need some new trim," she said.

"Come on," said Litho. He led his family away.

Cog emerged from behind the rack of toys, and watched the robots go. He was thinking hard. Very hard. Almost as hard as a genius. "I need an amazing, incredible plan," he said. "They won't just give me a toy..."

Cog followed the robots.

* * * * *

The machines were pounding away in the rocket factory. The robots were hard at work. Trundle and Stoke had a spanner each. They tightened the bolts of an engine. It had only been half-finished, so most of the panels were missing. Trundle could see a tangle of pipes inside.

Kronkite pulled a lever, and the welding crane slid forwards. It touched the rocket engine with a shower of sparks.

Reckner was working in his repair bay a short distance away. He worked a lot more slowly than the others, although every bit as hard. There were loads of faulty parts which needed fixing. Reckner poked at a troublesome motor with a big, clunky tool.

"There we are," said Reckner. "That's the trouble! Soon have it singing like music. A little fiddling here...and there..."

Kronkite noticed a dial on the welding crane controls. "That's hot enough," he murmured. "Cool down..."

Kronkite twisted a knob, but the welding crane didn't switch off. It just kept heating the engine. The metal glowed a brilliant orange. The dial went into the red. "Trundle! Watch out!" yelled Kronkite.

Trundle dodged a shower of sparks which shot from the welding crane. Stoke jumped behind an iron pillar.

Reckner could hear a fizzing noise. He looked up from his work. Reckner knew the sounds of the factory backwards. He could tell if there was any danger.

Kronkite hit the big red emergency button, but nothing happened. "The welder's gone crazy!" he gasped. "It could melt the engine..."

Reckner rolled out of the repair bay on his squeaky old wheels. Kronkite stepped back from the heat. There was a thick cloud of white, stinking smoke which poured from the rocket engine.

"You need the damper switch," yelled Reckner. "Quick, Trundle!"

Kronkite was astonished at Reckner's quick thinking. Reckner rolled over to an older control bank. Trundle followed him. The dials whirled in chaos like those on a fruit machine. Reckner watched them, wisely.

"I'll show you how, Trundle. Take the lever," said Reckner.

Trundle did so. Reckner watched the dials.

"Wait for it...", said Reckner. "Wait...wait. NOW!"

Trundle pulled the lever.

The dials stopped spinning, one after the other. Each had a picture of a water droplet. The welding crane switched off, and the sparks stopped flying. Water hissed from a sprinkler to cool things down.

Kronkite punched the air. "That's done it!" he yelled. The smoke began to clear away.

Reckner nodded at Trundle, with a wise look in his eyes. "Never trusted these new machines," he said. "It's a dangerous place. Well - back to work, I guess."

Reckner rolled back to his repair bay, humming a rustic, rusty tune. Trundle nodded with a new respect.

* * * * *

Gaffer had lots of TV screens in front of him. The other robots did all the work, so he was lazing with his feet up. Suddenly, Gaffer heard an angry voice.

"What's this? Some kind of joke?"

Gaffer jumped up. "Oops! Sorry, sir," he said. "Just a rest, sir. Stiff joints."

But the words hadn't been aimed at Gaffer. A large, sleek robot slid into view. It was the factory boss, Cyton Zero. He looked like a robot insect on a smooth, gliding base. Cyton was shiny black, with silver trim.

Cyton's head stretched on a long, silver neck as he peered at a TV screen. It showed Reckner pottering in his repair bay. There wasn't much being done.

"He's an old HydroClutch, isn't he?" said Cyton. "A mechanical fossil..."

Gaffer played along to please his boss. "Ha! Yes, Cyton Zero, sir. A very slow worker."

Cyton wriggled his silver tentacles. "I don't like slow workers, Gaffer. He could fix that rocket in a minute."

Gaffer nodded. "Yes, sir."

"He's slowing us down, Gaffer," said Cyton. "I want a word with him. Call him up."

"Sir!" Gaffer picked up the microphone and switched it on. His voice echoed through the factory. "Ahem...HydroClutch zero-three-one, up to control..."

Cyton watched the TV screen. Reckner glanced up at the voice.

"HydroClutch zero-three-one, up to control..."

Cyton grabbed the microphone. "And FAST!!!"

* * * * *

Cog followed the Litho family from the Joy-Toys shop, out into the busy street. He was not used to the surface of the Metal Moon, as he lived on a suburban saucer.

There were huge factories in the distance, which towered over the shops. The streets were choked by an endless stream of traffic. The noise scared Cog a little, and he wanted to go home. But he had to find a toy first.

Litho, Lucid and Lockit walked along the street. Lockit was slightly behind, as he was weighed down by the boxes. One was big enough to carry, but four?

Cog dodged through the crowds, so he was a little way ahead. He popped his head round a post box. "Come on, Cog," he said, thinking very, very hard.

The Litho family were coming. Cog didn't have much time. His cog wheels started to spin. "Think...think...an amazing plan!" he said. Cog tapped his head. "I'm a genius..."

Litho and Lucid walked past the post box, but Lockit was dragging behind. Lockit stopped for a second. "Hey! These toys are getting heavy!" he moaned.

Litho and Lucid looked back. "Okay, Lockit. I'll take one," said Litho.

Litho did. Cog could see Lockit's cap above his pile of boxes.

"And I'll take one," said Lucid.

Lucid did. Cog could see the top of Lockit's big, round eyes.

"And I'll take one!" said Cog.

Cog jumped out, snatched a box and ran. What a genius!

Lockit was left with the last box. He looked left and right, totally confused. His eyes started to spin.

Lucid stared at Litho, with her hands on her hips. "Do something, Litho!" she screeched.

"Sure, Lucid," said Litho, in a calm, quiet voice. He turned to the passing crowds. "Help! Quick! We've been burgled!" he yelled. Litho waved his arms in the air, but no-one paid any attention.

* * * * *

Reckner and Gaffer stood in a big, heavy lift. It was built like a metal cage. The floor was made of mesh, so they could see right to the ground. It was best not to look down.

The lift was creeping up the wall of the rocket factory. It was like a great rusty cliff. The robots could see the green sky of the Metal Moon, and a vista of other factories. Steel girders dropped past, one by one, as the lift rose higher and higher. There was a bleak whistle of wind.

"I've never been up here before," said Reckner.

"There's a last time for everything," said Gaffer.

"Don't you mean, a first time?" asked Reckner.

Gaffer felt a little uneasy. "I know what I mean," he said.

The lift reached the top of the rocket factory. It vanished through a hatch. This led into the highest section, which looked like a flying saucer perched on the roof.

The lift doors slid open with a grinding noise. Reckner started forward, but Gaffer stopped him.

"Wipe your wheels!" said Gaffer. He stepped onto a brown fuzzy rug, and wiped his feet. Reckner didn't have any feet, but he whirred his wheels on the rug.

"You'll do," said Gaffer. The robots moved into the passage. The rug slid aside for a clean one.

The robots entered a saucer-shaped room. "Sparks above!" said Reckner. He was amazed at the place. "I've never seen anything like it."

Reckner's eyes swept round the circular window. He could see most of the Factory Zone, as far as the Sludge Canal.

Gaffer didn't like it up here. Everything was bright and beautiful, but the place was cold and chilling. He preferred his scruffy control room, where he could do what he liked. He could boss the other robots, instead of being bossed around.

There were loads of models displayed on stands, like treasures in a rich museum. They were lit by spots of pure white light, which shone down from the ceiling.

Reckner spotted a model factory. "Incredible," he said. Reckner loved anything to do with the old days. The model was perfect in every detail, right to the last rivet. It had been made by a master modeller.

"That's the old factory!" said Reckner, with a gleam in his eye. It brought back many happy memories. The factory was covered in tangled pipes, like bits of scrap. The chimneys were fat and clumsy. "I used to work there, Gaffer," said Reckner. "Tore it down for this place..."

Gaffer felt a tinge of sadness in his metal heart. He knew how much this meant to Reckner, but he couldn't hang around. "Come on. Cyton's waiting," said Gaffer. "The boss doesn't wait."

But Gaffer was wrong. Cyton was watching from a doorway, and his voice boomed across the room. "Let him look," said Cyton. "I can handle this alone."

"Yes, sir!" said Gaffer. He turned on the spot like a soldier, and marched back to the lift. Gaffer was glad to get away.

Cyton slid out from the shadows. He didn't have any legs, as he moved on a metal ball. This was hidden by a metal cloak. Cyton glided across the carpet, without any sound.

Reckner had never met the boss before. He was speechless.

Cyton stopped by Reckner, and spoke to him like a friend. "This is my private museum, Reckner," said Cyton. "Everything the company's done, from start to finish. No...not finish. I don't want to finish yet."

"Of course not, Mr. Zero," said Reckner.

Cyton stretched a silver tentacle. He nudged Reckner on a tour past the model factories, over to another display.

There were many different types of rocket engine. Some were sliced open to show the insides. The early ones were history now, as they hadn't been built for years.

"There's a universe out there," said Cyton. "Everyone needs a rocket. We make the best engines this side of the Spindle Nebula - and when I buy the Spindle Factory, the best anywhere."

Cyton stopped by another display. There were loads of model robots, of many different kinds. They had all worked for Zero Rockets. Some were incredibly crude and clunky, while others were more advanced - including the Trundle types.

Cyton pointed at one set of models, which looked a lot like Reckner. "Hmmm. The HydroClutch robots," said Cyton. "Better than the ClockSpin robots. And they were better than the SteamChug robots. The SteamChug robots were terrible!"

Reckner smiled. He could remember the old SteamChugs, huffing and puffing. They had been old when he was new, but that was a long time ago. "The HydroClutches work hard, sir," said Reckner. "I'm the last of a good bunch..."

"...and the company's grateful, Reckner," said Cyton. He moved away from Reckner, and gazed through the circular window. He could see the lights of a thousand factories.

"It's a tough business," said Cyton. "We're the cutting edge! I'm afraid your edge...doesn't cut."

Cyton turned towards Reckner. He waved a blade in the air. It was one of many gadgets, which were fixed to his silver tentacles.

Reckner slumped a little. "Doesn't cut?"

Cyton pointed at the model robots. "You're the oldest HydroClutch, Reckner," he said. "I was sad to see them go." Cyton shook his head in sorrow - or he faked it very well.

Reckner could tell what was coming.

"You're proud of the company?" asked Cyton. "Proud to work for Zero Rockets?"

"Yes...sir," said Reckner.

"Then play your part," said Cyton. "You're retired. Here's a token of our thanks..."

Cyton gave Reckner a gold watch.

The rocket trams raced along their tracks, between the towering buildings of the City Zone. One of the trams started up a steep stretch of track, which rose into the sky. "Going up!" said the throaty voice on the speaker.

The tram was pretty empty, as it was the middle of the day. Cog was sitting alone with the model kit. He tried to read the writing on the box. "'Y...you can b-build a...SnapiKat. Um...S-sonny-Snail...a Guy-Fish. Er, Dee-Slug. Dinny-Slug!'"

Cog was happy he'd read that far, but the next bit looked very difficult. "'Um. Kit...con. Kit, con...con...'"

Cog was soon sitting in the Play Park, with Tweeter by his side. She was a lot cleverer than he was. Tweeter looked at the model kit box, and read it aloud. "'Kit contains parts for ONE pet ONLY!'"

"What does that mean?" asked Cog.

"You've got to bust your DinoSlug to make a SnapiKat," said Tweeter.

"I don't wanna bust the DinoSlug!" whined Cog.

But Tweeter wasn't bothered about Cog. She was far more interested in Cog's best toy. It was a lot better than she'd expected. It looked brand new.

Tweeter opened the golden box. She gasped at what she could see. There was a fascinating selection of kit parts, with blueprints printed on the inside lid.

Tweeter took out a part, and held it in her silver fingers. It was small and round, with wires sticking out. "We're not gonna hurt anything," she said. "They all use the same brain."

"Wow! That's clever," said Cog.

Tweeter held the brain to her ear. "Well, it's not saying anything," she said. Tweeter spoke to the brain. "Hello? Anyone in there?"

"Must be asleep," said Cog. "What's that?" He took a red cylinder from the box.

"A battery," said Tweeter. "You fix it all together..."

"Let's have a go!" said Cog. It sounded fun.

"Uh-oh! My toy, Cog," said Tweeter. "Remember the deal. How come the genius never made a SnapiKat? Or even a DinoSlug?"

Cog had to think why not, and fast. "Um...it was a present," he said. "I found it! I won it in a raffle! I swapped it for a pinball game! I've had it for years, I've never liked it."

Tweeter whipped the box away from Cog. She snapped the lid shut. "Thanks, Cog," said Tweeter.

"Can I have a go?" asked Cog.

"No!" said Tweeter. She turned away.

"I didn't steal it!" said Cog.

"I didn't say you did," said Tweeter. She marched out of the Play Park. Cog was stuck on his own.

There was no-one to play with now, thought Cog. Maybe he should have kept the kit for himself...but a deal was a deal, after all. Cog jumped off the wall by the plastic plants, where he always sat with Tweeter. He kicked a tin can, but someone called his name.

"Hey, Cog! Want a race up the climbing frame?"

Cog turned to see Ratchit, who was a tubby little robot. He looked a lot like Cog, but had bright yellow paintwork and one big wheel on his chest. Ratchit pointed up at the climbing frame.

"Yeah! You bet!" yelled Cog. He forgot his troubles and ran to join the fun.

* * * * *

Another Metal Moon day was coming to a close. The sun was low in the sky. There were some straggly birds sitting on the big metal cone, up on the factory roof.

Suddenly, there was a grinding sound. The birds flapped off in fright. The cone began rising, and stopped with a judder.

There was a moment of silence, when nothing happened. The only sound was the moan of the wind. One bird flapped back and sat on top of the cone. Suddenly, the slots opened in the sides. It blasted an almighty wail of noise.

'Eeeoooww!!!'

The bird flew off in a panic. It was the factory siren, of course.

All over the factory, robot hands were dropping tools. There were lots of clanging sounds. The sky was growing dark through the overhead skylights. Greenish sunbeams sliced through the tall windows. Dozens of robots struggled along the balconies, keen to get home.

Stoke, Kronkite and Trundle put down their tools. They were too tired to drop them.

"Another day over. I'm whacked," said Stoke.

"Bet I'm more whacked than you," said Kronkite.

The three robots started to walk along. "That's why they built us, Stoke," said Trundle. "So we get whacked, not them."

"Yep. But who built them?" wondered Stoke.

"...and who's them?" added Kronkite.

"Don't know," said Trundle. "Tweeter's the brain of the family."

Trundle, Stoke and Kronkite reached the silent repair bay. "Hey - where's old Reckner?" said Kronkite. "He never came back."

Stoke picked up Reckner's chunky tool. He turned it round in his hand. It was big, heavy and as old as Reckner.

"That's his wangle-spanner," said Trundle. "He'd never leave that."

Trundle tried to think things over, but they heard a grating voice. "Clear the shift. Keep moving!" it said. It was Gaffer, on the factory speakers.

* * * * *

The rocket factory loomed on the horizon, half lost in the evening mist. The sound of the siren was a distant wail, like the cry of a sad animal. It stopped after a minute or two, when all the robots had gone.

There was a huge area of junk and rubbish, which hadn't been sorted out. Some would be melted, some left to rot, and some taken by the Garbage Grinders. But every time they took a load of rubbish, another lot came along. The place never looked much different.

There were huge piles of dented metal, twisted plastic and shattered glass. There were trickling rivers of sticky oil, dripping from broken machines. There were nasty chemicals, tangled wires and burnt electrical parts.

There was also a robot in the rubbish heap, although his parts were in full working order. Reckner's wheels meant he couldn't sit down, but he was slumped in a gloomy way. It wasn't a very cheerful place, but Reckner was used to grime.

Reckner didn't want to go home just yet. He was still thinking about the factory. Reckner looked at his gold watch, and remembered something. "Darn! I forgot my wangle-spanner," he said.

Suddenly, Reckner heard a scratching, scraping sound. There was a chink, chink, chink as a piece of metal bounced to the ground. Reckner peered into the gloom, a little wary. He wondered what it was.

The noise was getting louder, as if something was stalking through the junk yard. Reckner could hear it better now. He glanced up the slope.

Suddenly, a figure lurched over the junk pile. It was black against the darkening sky. The figure was holding a metal tool. It looked like a heavy weapon.

Reckner gasped. It might be a Scrap Scrounger, searching for bits. Reckner switched on his headlamp, but it was only Trundle.

"Sparks above!" said Reckner. "Trundle! You gave me a fright!"

Trundle plodded down the slope. "Good to see you, Reckner," he said. "We were worried."

Reckner relaxed, and flicked off his headlamp. The place had a strange beauty, once you were used to it. The piles of rubbish became mighty mountains, while the oil was a gentle stream.

The metal shapes glinted with rainbow edges, as they reflected the planet Multichrome. It was peeping through a gap in the clouds, but the gap wouldn't last for long.

Trundle stepped down from the junk pile, and looked for somewhere to sit. There wasn't anywhere very comfortable.

"Just mulling things over," said Reckner. "Got plenty of time." He glanced at his gold watch.

Trundle found a square piece of junk. It was too dark to see what it was - but he sat on it, even so. "Here's your wangle-spanner," said Trundle. He passed the heavy tool to Reckner.

But Reckner didn't take the spanner just yet. He showed Trundle his gold watch. "Won't be needing it, Trundle," said Reckner. "They gave me this. Plenty of time..."

Trundle gasped. He couldn't believe it. "You're joking, Reckner," he said. "You're the hardest worker! Keep going when the siren goes."

Reckner nodded gently, and looked at the junk around him. He was thinking of the old days.

"I love my job," said Reckner. "Check every rivet. But now? They want speed, speed, speed. Half those rockets are dangerous. No pride in the job. They just sell 'em, make more. It's all about money. Cheaper to cut corners."

Reckner switched his headlamp back on. He waved a spot of light across the mounds of junk. There were old computers, gear wheels, pipes and pistons.

"Look at this!" said Reckner. "Build it one day, smash it the next. That's all we are, Trundle. Parts of a big machine."

But Trundle wasn't listening. "Hey...can you see a telly up there?" he asked.

"A TV set?" frowned Reckner.

"Broke mine the other day," said Trundle. "Thought I might find one here."

Reckner knew Trundle had come to the right place. "You'd find anything here, Trundle," he said, "if you looked hard enough - including an old HydroClutch robot who's worth nothing anymore."

"That's not true, Reckner," said Trundle.

"But, a TV set?" said Reckner. "Why didn't you say? Bingo!" Reckner shone his lamp at the piece of junk which Trundle was sitting on.

Trundle stood and looked at the big, square box. He could see it was an old TV. "Oh! I never noticed," said Trundle. "You reckon it works?"

"I reckon I can fix it," said Reckner.

Trundle waved the wangle-spanner at Reckner. This time, Reckner was glad to take it.

* * * * *

Tweeter was sitting at the desk in her cosy bedroom, ready to start work. But it wasn't a job, or school work. This was a lot more fun.

Tweeter had the model kit in front of her. She looked at the pictures on the lid. She could build a SnapiKat, a SonicSnail, a GyroFish or a DinoSlug. Which was it going to be?

Tweeter opened the box, and admired the golden pieces. They gleamed in the soft light of her tablelamp. They invited her to build a little pet. Tweeter took out a small golden spanner.

Meanwhile, down in the junk yard, Reckner had a job to do. He was standing behind the TV set. Reckner pulled the back off with his big, heavy grippers. It was too dark to see anything inside.

Reckner flashed on his headlamp. The TV was full of wires, valves and silicon chips. They were all covered in dust. Reckner raised his wangle-spanner, and twisted some of the parts. Trundle stared at the blank screen.

"Anything yet?" asked Reckner.

A fizz of static flickered on the TV screen.

"Not sure," said Trundle.

Reckner fiddled some more. There was another fizz of static, and a crackle of sound.

"That any better?" asked Reckner.

Trundle wasn't sure. "Hmmm. Possibly..."

Meanwhile, up in her bedroom, Tweeter was hard at work. She was working harder than she did at school, but she was enjoying every minute.

Tweeter slotted two pieces together. Then she tightened the bolts with the golden spanner. "Now, what's next...?" said Tweeter. She glanced at the sheet of plans.

"Uh-huh. That's simple enough," said Tweeter. She took more parts from the box.

Meanwhile, back in the junk yard, Reckner was fiddling with the old TV. A fuzzy image appeared for a second. "That any better?" he asked.

"I think we got something there," said Trundle.

"Okay. This should do it," said Reckner.

Reckner bent low over the TV set. He pushed his wangle-spanner right inside. "Come on...darn it," said Reckner, as he tapped away.

There was an electrical buzzing sound. Trundle was a little worried. But Reckner was a tough old robot, so the sparks couldn't hurt him.

Meanwhile, up in her bedroom, Tweeter was hard at work. She took a pair of rotor-blades out of the box, and tried spinning them like a windmill. "Uh...right," said Tweeter, as she glanced at the plans. "I think I know how to do it..."

Meanwhile, down in the junk yard, Reckner was hard at work. A picture flickered on the old TV, but it was a very strange channel. It showed black and white images from outer space, coming from a distant planet.

"That any better?" asked Reckner.

"Looks...peculiar," said Trundle.

"The picture?" asked Reckner.

"No. The show," said Trundle. There were guys in funny hats riding four-legged animals. They fired little guns at each other.

Reckner shook his head. "This'll fix it," he said. Reckner did some more fiddling, but the picture rolled up the screen. There were sparks and a smell of burning. Smoke drifted from the TV set.

Reckner came round to look at the screen. "Not bad!" he said. At least there was a picture.

There was another spark. It was bigger this time. It was bright blue, and lit up the junk yard.

"Oh, my!" said Trundle. He put his hands over his eyes. But Reckner didn't mind. He'd seen a lot of sparks.

Meanwhile, up in her bedroom, Tweeter rummaged in the box. She found what she was looking for. It was small and round, with wires sticking out.

"Time for the brain!" said Tweeter.

But Reckner and Trundle were a lot less lucky. The old TV was sparking wildly, and the picture flashed on and off. Trundle was dreading a bang. He put his hands over his ears. Even Reckner backed away.

Trundle was right. There was a tremendous bang. The sides of the TV fell apart, and the picture fizzled out. The screen fell onto the ground.

Meanwhile, up in her bedroom, Tweeter jumped back from her work. "It's finished!" she said in a gleeful voice. Tweeter waved the spanner around.

Reckner approached the remains of the TV set. He poked it with his wangle-spanner. There was nothing but a wisp of smoke, rising in the air. "I think it's broken," said Reckner.

But Trundle wasn't there to hear him.

Reckner heard a clatter from a short way off. He turned towards the noise. It might be a Scrap Scrounger, and they didn't want trouble. But it was only Trundle, with another piece of junk.

"What about this?" asked Trundle. He held up a huge ghetto-blaster.

* * * * *

The giant, cloudy planet of Multichrome loomed large among the stars. There were several different moons, like coloured beads, and spaceships buzzed about their business. The Metal Moon's framework was a lacy silver, wrapped around a green centre.

But there was someone speaking in the deep void of space. It was a silvery voice on the radio. "Turn on, tune in to the Vick Void Show. The silver voicebox is gleaming again!"

Vick paused for a moment. The music became a little sadder. "We've an extra long show tonight," said Vick, "because - I'm sorry to say this, friends - I'm off on vacation soon." Vick waited a moment, as he knew his listeners would be upset.

"I know, please, save your tears," said Vick. "I'll be back on the air, don't worry. The shiny Stella Sheen shall fill the Vick-less Void, while I'm relaxing on the planet Beach Ball in the tropical seaside sun."

Vick knew his listeners would be desperate by now. He decided to cheer things up. "Anyhow, here's the delectable sound of Cosmic Cluster, guaranteed to beat your blues away..."

The music switched to bouncy jazz, with maracas and bongo drums. It had a very tropical feel, like the sound of a jungle paradise.

Vick had a lot of listeners on the Metal Moon. One had a new ghetto-blaster, which sat proudly on the sideboard. It wasn't really new, but it sounded new. It had been found in a junk yard, with other broken bits and pieces. The dial was alive with pretty colours. They twinkled in time with the beat.

Toggle was standing by the ghetto-blaster, ready and waiting. Trundle was slumped in his armchair. Toggle perked up at a beat in the music. She started a gentle dance.

"I'd love to go there, Trundle," said Toggle, as she moved to and fro.

"Where?" asked Trundle, though he wasn't very bothered.

"The planet Beach Ball, silly!" said Toggle. "Weren't you listening to Vick?"

"I miss the TV, Toggle," said Trundle.

"You broke it, Trundle," said Toggle.

"I tried to fix it..."

"...by thumping it?"

"Thumped a bit too hard," said Trundle.

Toggle patted the ghetto-blaster. "But this works," she said. "Thanks, Trundle. You're a treasure, shiny!"

"Don't feel so shiny," said Trundle. "Need a shower."

The music was getting faster and more bouncy. Toggle tugged Trundle up from his armchair, and bobbed up and down. She nodded at Trundle, hoping he'd dance along.

"Come on! Feel the beat!" said Toggle.

"I can feel the creaks," said Trundle. His joints were stiff after a long day's work. He needed a rest, not stress.

Toggle bobbed along to the bouncy music. "Never mind, Trundle. Cha, cha, cha!"

Trundle groaned - but what could he do? He started a stiff dance to keep her happy.

Tweeter was still in her bedroom. She looked at the strange thing sitting on her desk, which she'd made from the model kit. "Hmmm. You've got rotor-blades, haven't you?" said Tweeter. "So I'll call you...Rota!"

Tweeter held up a small, golden hoop. "Come on, Rota," she said. "Fly! Fly!" There was a whirr as the rotors started to spin, and the sound of something jumping up and down.

Toggle could see Trundle wasn't in a musical mood. "Hey...you dance like a robot," she said. "Loosen up!"

"Got a screwdriver?" groaned Trundle.

"I don't mean that!" sighed Toggle. "Vick's got the best music. I'm gonna miss him. Who likes Stella Sheen?"

"Give her a chance," said Trundle. Stella couldn't be worse than Vick. Trundle's slow dancing got even slower.

Toggle gave up the struggle. "Okay. Have a shower," she said. "Whatever you like."

"Have fun," said Trundle, as he left the room.

Toggle was having fun all right. She kept dancing on her own. "Mmm. The planet Beach Ball," she whispered. She was thinking of Vick's vacation. Toggle could see the sun, sea and sand. "Now, that sounds like fun," she smiled.

Tweeter was holding the small, golden hoop. She hoped her pet could fly. The pet hadn't taken off, but it was trying to jump higher.

"Oh, Rota! You're not trying," said Tweeter. She lowered the hoop a little. "That easier?"

The rotor-blades sped up with a whirling sound. The pet made a few failed jumps.

Tweeter sighed, and lowered the hoop. It was hardly off the desk at all. The pet jumped straight through the middle. It made a cheeky beep of pleasure.

"Now, that's cheating," said Tweeter. Jumping was far too easy.

Trundle didn't have time for silliness. He wanted to relax. "At last," said Trundle, as he stepped inside the shower. The glass door slid down behind him.

The nozzle started spraying clear blue liquid. It wasn't water, but a special soap. It kept robots as clean as a carbon crystal...or at least, that's what the adverts said.

Trundle loved the shower. He raised his arms as high as he could, and two brushes slid out from the walls. They whirled up and down his tired metal body. There were lots of foamy bubbles.

But Tweeter hadn't given up in her bedroom. She knew Rota was able to fly, because the model kit said so. She lifted the small golden hoop, and jiggled it a little. "Come on, Rota!" said Tweeter. "You can do it..."

Rota's tiny rotor-blades were spinning faster.

"One, two, three...hop!" said Tweeter.

Suddenly, Rota buzzed up off the desk. Tweeter gasped. This was quite a toy!

Rota was a small robot made of golden metal. He looked a lot like a goldfish. Rota had rotor-blades on top of his body, and grippers underneath.

Rota could fly alright. There was no stopping him now. Rota whizzed straight through the hoop, circled Tweeter, then shot out of the room.

"Hey!" yelled Tweeter. He was getting away!

Toggle was still bopping to the music on her ghetto-blaster. Suddenly, Rota whizzed into the room and circled her.

"Eek!" shrieked Toggle. "Creepy-crawly!" She tried to swat Rota, but he dodged away. Toggle lost her balance. Rota zipped through the door.

Tweeter dashed in from her bedroom, a second or two behind Rota. Toggle was sprawled on Trundle's armchair, waving her arms around.

"Sorry, Mom," said Tweeter. "Rota!" Tweeter ran after her pet.

Trundle was as clean as the shower could make him. The factory grime had turned the liquid grey. The whirling brushes slid into the walls, as the shower started sucking. The dirty liquid shot straight up the nozzle.

There was a hissing noise, and the door slid open. Trundle stepped out of the shower. He was refreshed, if still a little rusty. "Aye...that's better," said Trundle.

Suddenly, Rota zipped past Trundle. He flew straight into the shower. Trundle watched, bemused, as the door slid down. Rota was trapped behind the glass.

Rota had never seen a shower before. In fact, he'd never seen anything before. He was very, very curious, though he wasn't very wise.

Rota hovered just below the nozzle. He gazed up at the tiny holes. Where was he?

But Rota flew a little too close. The shower bleeped, switched itself on, and blasted him with blue liquid. Rota dropped out of sight.

The whirling brushes slid in from the walls, and scrubbed each other clean. The shower was filled with bubbles.

Toggle heaved herself up from the armchair, though she didn't want to dance. What was Tweeter up to now?

Trundle stood staring at the shower. He was totally confused. The nozzle sucked up the blue liquid. The door slid open with a hissing sound.

Rota was at the bottom of the shower. He was sitting in a blue puddle. Rota folded up his rotor-blades. He was a lot less plucky now.

But Rota had an audience. Tweeter stretched her arm, and lifted him gently from the shower. Trundle watched in amazement, with Toggle beside him. There were three pairs of robot eyes, gazing at Rota.

"Mom...Dad," said Tweeter. "Meet Rota the GyroFish!"

Rota squirted a drop of blue liquid, just like a tiny whale. The robots started to laugh.

A bubble floated from the shower. It framed them as a family group. The music on the ghetto-blaster stopped, just as the bubble popped.

The Metal Moon floated among the stars, just like a big soap bubble. But it was not alone in the the void. A smart starship passed overhead, gleaming with tiny white lights. It was long and sleek, with red and black stripes. The starship moved with a smooth, silent grace.

All was busy on the Metal Moon. Smoke poured from the chimneys at the start of another day, and blackened the greenish sky. Wheels were spinning, machines chugging. Things were being made.

The smoke drifted over the junk yard, where Reckner's watch was laying in the dust. Its gold case glinted in the sunshine. The hands ticked round behind the crystal window.

The dial had shapes instead of numbers. There were triangles, squares and squiggles. But the meaning was clear enough. The working day had begun.

Trundle, Kronkite and Stoke were hard at work, just like any other day. Trundle was up on a balcony, just above the rocket roller. He pulled heavy levers and twisted knobs. Trundle had a toolbox beside him, not far from the edge.

Stoke was bolting an engine part, one level below. He was working as fast as he could. But Gaffer's voice rasped over the speakers. "Speed along! This engine is slow!" said Gaffer.

Trundle saw a screen flash with robot lettering. It told him what to do. "Steel basher," said Trundle. He pulled another lever.

Stoke looked up at Trundle, and whistled. Trundle looked over the railing. "Hey, Trundle!" yelled Stoke. "I need a hand down here!"

"Coming, Stoke," said Trundle. He grabbed a spanner from his toolbox, slid down a ladder, and helped Stoke with the engine.

Not far away, a big machine switched itself on. It was the steel basher, which bashed the rocket engines. This made sure they were strong enough. The steel basher began to chug, as the power built up inside. Great gearwheels turned with a deep, rumbling sound. They shook the thin balconies.

Trundle had left his toolbox near the edge of the balcony, in the rush to help Stoke. It began to shake very slightly as the balcony shook, and slid nearer the edge.

The red and black starship dropped through the clouds, high above the factory. It passed through the thick, grey smoke which belched from the chimneys. The starship docked with the saucer, up on the roof. It bobbed like an airship in the breeze.

Cyton Zero was sitting at the end of a long, crystal table. He was staring straight ahead. Cyton tapped his silver tentacles on the hard, shiny surface. "Well, Mr. Spindle," he said. "Will you sign?"

Spindle was sitting at the other end of the table. He was a gangly robot, but smart and new. His body was red and black, which matched the colours of his starship.

Spindle peered at the contract on the table before him. It had lots of very small lettering, and was printed on silver-blue paper. "Sixty-six billion for Spindle Motors?" he asked.

"And I'll throw in a gold watch!" said Cyton. "Make the deal. Make yourself rich. Make me the biggest rocket-maker in the galaxy."

"I'll sign," said Spindle. He held a pen over the contract and clicked the button. A laser beam shot out and wrote a strange, squiggly signature.

* * * * *

There was more work being done in the Digital Academy. Or at least, there should have been. Mr. Neuron examined his class. Two of the desks were empty. It looks like trouble, thought Tweeter. Even Jett wasn't being silly.

Mr. Neuron lifted his pointer arm. He swept it over the class. There was only one question to ask, and Mr. Neuron asked it. "Anyone know where Cog and...Ratchit have got to?"

Nobody said anything. Mr. Neuron kept sweeping his pointer, past Jiggle, Amp and Spin.

Tweeter glanced to and fro, but no-one else said anything. The pointer was getting nearer. She raised her hand. The pointer stopped, and everyone stared.

Tweeter felt very sorry, but it was no good now. "I think I know, Mr. Neuron..."

* * * * *

The gold watch kept ticking as time passed by, but Reckner wasn't watching the clock. He had placed three tin cans in a row, on top of an old computer. Suddenly, a steel nut flew over and knocked one off.

If they didn't give him work, thought Reckner, he might as well play a game. Even so, it wasn't much fun. Reckner aimed another nut with a catapult, which he'd made from a bent pipe. Reckner's speed was slow and sluggish, as he was a very sad robot.

Reckner fired the nut, and it flew through the air. There was a ping as metal hit metal. The tin can fell to the ground.

This was far too easy, thought Reckner. He had years to go, and he was bored already.

Reckner's old boss was keeping busy. A sliding door rose with a gentle hum. Cyton left his office. He led Spindle to the private museum, with its large collection of models.

Spindle was delighted at the sight before him. He had lots of models back home, of course, but these were nearly as good. Spindle wanted to look at the model rockets, but Cyton nudged him along to the factories.

Cyton waved a silver tentacle at the first factory, which looked like a enormous boiler. It had wonky chimneys, rivets and crazy plumbing.

"A factory must grow, Spindle," said Cyton. "This was my simple beginning. Too simple. So I knocked it down and built this..."

Cyton waved Spindle to the next model. It was a lot bigger, and looked very familiar. Spindle had seen the view from his starship as he dropped through the clouds. Spindle tapped the tiny saucer on top. "We're up here," he said.

"Very clever," said Cyton. It was Zero Rockets, just as it was today. The model had every window and archway, made in perfect detail. Spindle could even see the factory siren.

Cyton wriggled his silver tentacles. He still wasn't happy. "But it's far too small," he added.

Spindle thought there might be a third model, bigger and better than the rest. But Cyton nudged him along to an empty space, where he traced a huge factory in the air.

"Imagine the next rocket factory," said Cyton. "Bigger and better than ever! We can do anything, Spindle. We are the Masters of Infinity!"

Cyton stretched his silver tentacles. Spindle felt a little frightened.

* * * * *

Tweeter was standing at the front of the class, next to the big black-screen. She spoke into a small gold microphone, which came with the model kit. "Rota! Show us...the genius!"

There was a fizz of static on the screen, and a shaky picture appeared. It showed Cog and Ratchit on top of the climbing frame, waving their arms for help.

Jett called out from his desk. "Two geniuses!"

The class laughed.

Mr. Neuron shook his head. This was getting stupid. He pressed a button, and spoke into a voice box. "Call the Crisis Crew..."

The machines were still rumbling in the rocket factory. The steel basher was bashing away. The basher went thump, thump, thump. The balcony shook even more. The toolbox slid to the very edge. It wobbled for a second, and dropped over.

Kronkite was walking back from the Break Bay, after taking a break. Stoke spotted the toolbox. "Look out!" he yelled.

Kronkite looked up. He gulped, and jumped out of the way. The toolbox crashed to the ground. It scattered spanners and screwdrivers with a tinkle of metal.

Trundle shook his head. "Oh, my..."

"Nearly a nasty accident," said Stoke.

* * * * *

Toggle was relaxing at home when the telephone rang. There was some peaceful music on her ghetto-blaster, which sounded a lot better. But the phone kept ringing, so she had to talk. Toggle answered the phone. "Hello?"

It was Mr. Neuron from the Digital Academy. "I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am," he said, "but Tweeter's in trouble."

"Oh no!" sighed Toggle. "I'm sorry." She put down the phone, but it rang again. Toggle picked it up. "Hello?"

"This is Cogette! Cog's mom," said an angry voice. "I thought Cog was playing with Tweeter!"

"So did I," said Toggle. "I'm sorry." She put down the phone, but it rang again. Toggle picked it up. "Hello?"

"This is Ratchette! Ratchit's mom," said an angry voice. "I thought Ratchit was playing with Tweeter!"

"So did I," said Toggle. "I'm sorry." She put down the phone and shook her head. "I'm sorry Tweeter's a genius," said Toggle.

Then Cogette and Ratchette rang each other. They argued the rest of the day.

The Crisis Crew skyship was sitting on a launchpad, with two Crisis Crew members sitting in the sun. It was great being in the Crisis Crew, but only when there wasn't a crisis. They could admire their bright orange helmets and bright orange skyship. They enjoyed the peace and quiet.

But not for long. A siren started wailing, and a speaker barked out the orders. "Crisis Crew! Crisis Crew! Action time!" it yelled. "Crisis Crew! Crisis Crew! ACTION!!!"

The Crisis Crew glanced at each other. No choice. They'd better do what it said.

Back in the Digital Academy, the class couldn't stop laughing. They could still see Ratchit and Cog on the black-screen, clinging to the climbing frame.

But enough was enough, thought Mr. Neuron. He raised his pointer arm. The chatter and giggles stopped in a second, and the room was left in silence.

"Very clever," said Mr. Neuron. "I'll see Ratchit and Cog later. But where's your homework, Tweeter? 'What My Dad Does For A Job'."

Mr. Neuron looked at the rest of the class. "Has everyone done their homework?" he asked.

"Yes, sir!!!" yelled the other robots. They waved sheets of silver paper.

Mr. Neuron turned to Tweeter. "So...where's yours?"

All the other robots giggled. They were glad Tweeter was in trouble.

"My homework...?" asked Tweeter.

"Yes," said Mr. Neuron.

"Where is it...?" asked Tweeter.

"Yes," said Mr. Neuron.

Tweeter looked at Mr. Neuron. She tried not to blink. The class didn't like her, but she didn't care. "Uh...I didn't just write, Mr. Neuron," said Tweeter. She had a bright idea. "I can show you!"

* * * * *

The factory machines kept working, and the noise was louder than ever. The rocket roller whirred along, bringing another rocket. Another rocket meant even more work.

Stoke, Trundle and Kronkite looked at the fallen toolbox. "You were lucky," said Stoke.

Kronkite nodded. He was a big, tough robot, but he still felt shaken. "Think I'll take a break," said Kronkite. He wandered off to the Break Bay.

"Not another break!" said Stoke.

"Mmm," nodded Trundle.

"Oh...fair enough," said Stoke. He didn't want to be mean.

But Trundle wasn't really listening. The steel basher had stopped bashing, and he could hear an extra noise. It was very, very faint, like a distant growl. There was a crackle, too, like fire...

Stoke took a stray screwdriver, which had dropped out of the toolbox. "We must take more care with safety," he said. "It's lucky I..."

Suddenly, a massive explosion rocked the floor. A wall of flame rose above the rocket roller. It lit the factory with an orange glow.

Trundle knew what the noise had been. "Oh no! The main boiler's blown," he gasped. Reckner had warned him about the trouble. Reckner had been right all along.

The rocket roller jerked to a halt with an ugly, clanking sound. A huge rocket engine fell off the roller. It bounced across the factory floor.

"Run!!!" yelled Stoke.

Stoke and Trundle raced away from the rolling rocket. They jumped to one side. The rocket hit the wall with an almighty thump, which echoed around the factory. The robots glanced at each other in terror.

Stoke was closer to the rocket than Trundle. He could see the danger. The rocket was making a fizzing noise. Something had been shaken inside.

Stoke lifted his spanner. Sparks shot out of the rocket. "It's firing up," said Stoke. "There's a chance I can stop it." Stoke walked towards the rocket.

"Stoke!" yelled Trundle. "Come on! Get out of here!"

But Stoke didn't answer. He only had a few seconds, if that. "Got to twist the pyro-damper," he said.

Stoke looked at the top of the rocket. There was a bright red arrow, which pointed to a big metal bolt. The air was becoming very hot.

Stoke put his spanner over the bolt. "Just twist it," he said. "Come on..."

The bolt began to turn.

"Nearly there," said Stoke. "Come on..."

There was a loud bang, and a blast of hot air. Stoke gasped. The rocket had fired.

"No...!" cried Trundle.

The rocket slid across the floor. Stoke staggered back, but there was no escape. There was a horrible crunch of metal. Trundle covered his eyes.

The rocket streaked forwards, faster and faster. Trundle jumped out of the way. The rocket ripped through the railings at the edge of the floor. It dropped into the depths below.

Gaffer was lazing in his control room, just like any other day. But an orange flash caught his eye. He looked up at the TV screens. There was fire on one, smoke on another. Gaffer hit the emergency button.

Somewhere deep in the factory, the rocket engine hit the floor. The crash shook the whole building. Walls began to buckle, and staircases collapsed.

The birds were sitting on the factory siren. They could hear a rumble from below. Suddenly, there was a grinding sound. The birds flapped off in fright. The siren shot up higher than usual, and unfolded extra sirens. It blasted an almighty wail of noise.

'EEEEOOWWW!!!'

Reckner was aiming at another tin can. He froze with the catapult in his hand, as he listened to the distant sound.

All over the factory, robot hands were dropping tools. They made lots of clanging sounds. The robots ran along the balconies, and scrambled down ladders. Dozens of robots streamed through the factory gates, as flames burst through the building.

Cog and Ratchit were stuck on the climbing frame. They were bathed in a faint orange light. "Look!!!" they yelled, as they pointed at something. What was going on?

The class could see Cog and Ratchit on the black-screen. Tweeter spoke into her microphone. "Rota! About turn!"

Rota was hovering over the climbing frame, just in front of Cog and Ratchit. His big round eyes were tiny cameras, which sent pictures back to Tweeter.

Rota bleeped, and turned in the air. The TV picture whizzed round. It settled on the Factory Zone, way in the distance. The rocket factory was ablaze.

Tweeter gasped in horror. "That's...where my Daddy works."

The Crisis Crew skyship flew low over the Play Park, but it shot past the climbing frame. Rota opened his grippers. The skyship turned, and raced towards him. Rota grabbed an aerial. Time for a free ride!

Cog and Ratchit waved their arms. "Hey!!! What about us?" they yelled.

* * * * *

Cyton's curved, sparkling office was shaking slightly. There was a rumble of explosions far below. But Cyton wasn't at all worried. His voice was perfectly calm.

"Oh dear. Another little accident," said Cyton. "It's a very dangerous place. Glad we're building a new one."

Spindle was more shaken. "We'd better get out of here," he said. "Don't forget my sixty-six billion."

"I won't," said Cyton.

Spindle dashed for the door.

Flame licked through the factory windows, and smoke rose in the sky. Gaffer drove out on a motor-scooter.

The floor by the rocket roller was tilting, as the legs gave way underneath. Trundle hoped he could do some good. He crawled up the slippery slope, towards the repair bay. Trundle could see the control box with the safety lever. The dials were spinning like crazy.

"Get to the safety switch," said Trundle. "Cool things down..."

But Trundle spotted something horrible. He froze like a statue, and stared at the object. It was Stoke's arm, with wires sticking out. It was still holding the spanner.

Trundle gasped. "Oh, my..."

The legs under the floor buckled. They couldn't take the heat. The floor tilted, and Trundle slid backwards. He could see the safety controls getting smaller, as he slid further and further away.

"Help!!!" yelled Trundle. But there was no-one to help.

Trundle tried to stop himself, but the railings had been ripped by the rocket. There was nothing to grab anymore. Trundle tumbled over the edge, and fell into the darkness.

The siren continued blaring on the roof. It blared too much, and blew up.

Reckner gazed at the burning factory. He was stunned by the terrible scene. Reckner could remember the old factory, back in the past. There had been trouble when a star barge smashed into the side. But this was far, far worse.

Reckner snapped into action. He dropped the catapult, and moved as fast as he could.

Spindle's starship pulled back from the saucer on the roof. It turned like a graceful insect, and glided through the smoke. The engines glowed a shimmering pink as it flew into the sky.

Cyton's saucer started to spin, with a gentle humming sound. It lifted off from the factory.

Dozens of robots had gathered in the factory yard. It was just like a fire drill, but with a real fire. Gaffer looked at the lines of robots. He checked them off on a clipboard.

"RumbleChip two-six-two?" said Gaffer.

"Yessir!" said a worker robot.

"And RumbleChip two-six-three?" said Gaffer.

"Yessir!" said another worker robot.

"Right," said Gaffer. "Is that everyone?"

Kronkite had been sitting in the Break Bay, so he'd made an easy escape. "Hey - where's Stoke? And Trundle?" said Kronkite.

Gaffer looked at his clipboard. "You mean RumbleChip one-zero-two and..."

"They've got names, Gaffer!" snapped Kronkite. "Anyone seen 'em?" He waved his arms at the robots. There were a lot of blank looks.

But one of the robots could hear something. He glanced to his right. There was a low rumble, which was getting closer.

Deep down in the factory, Trundle was flat on his back. He had landed in a dark pit, with tunnels in all directions. A large girder had fallen across his chest, so it pinned him to the ground. Scraps of metal dropped like silver rain, with a tinkling sound. Trundle tried to wriggle free, but he couldn't shift the girder.

Trundle stopped moving. It was hopeless. He could hear the noise of explosions and sirens, which echoed from the upper floors. He knew what would happen if they couldn't put out the fire.

Trundle wasn't the only one who knew it. He could hear another sound. He listened in the darkness, wondering what it was. There was a slurping, a squelch, then another slurp.

Trundle watched, amazed, as a blobby creature slithered out of the shadows. Its glowing eyes blinked in a curious way, as it wondered who he was. But there was nothing the blob could do, thought Trundle. It knew the danger, just like him, and had to find a way out. The blob slithered down a pipe.

Outside, in the factory yard, the rumble was getting louder. The sharp-eared robot cried out. "Hey! It's the Crisis Crew!"

Suddenly, Reckner burst through the factory gates. He skidded to a halt by the line of robots, blowing up a cloud of dust. Gaffer looked at Reckner. "You're the Crisis Crew?" he scowled.

The sharp-eared robot pointed at the sky. "No! They're the Crisis Crew!" he yelled.

The Crisis Crew skyship dropped out of the sky, and landed in the factory yard. Its siren was blaring, its lights were flashing. It was lucky the robots didn't need to breathe, as they would have choked with all the dust.

The line of robots cheered in joy, although Kronkite and Gaffer were silent. They knew things were very serious. The Crisis Crew couldn't work miracles.

The door of the skyship opened, and the Crisis Crew ran down the ramp. They had heads like fireman's helmets, with a flame badge on their chests. Reckner and Kronkite listened as they spoke to Gaffer.

"What's the trouble?" asked the Crisis Crew Boss.

"Fire," said Gaffer, pointing at the fire.

"Looks like a crisis to me," said the other robot. He was only a Crisis Crew.

"Two trapped inside," said Gaffer.

Reckner slapped a hand to his face. "Oh, my..."

"Don't worry," said the Crisis Crew Boss. "We're the best in the business." He whipped out an X-Ray scanner, and aimed it at the factory. Then he pressed a button. A map of the factory appeared on the screen, with a flashing light in the basement.

"There's one trapped," said the Crisis Crew Boss. "A RumbleChip, number zero-nine-nine."

"That's Trundle," said Reckner.

"You mean...Stoke?" gasped Kronkite.

"He's gone," said the Crisis Crew Boss.

Kronkite covered his eyes. Stoke was an old friend.

"Okay, I'm the Gaffer," said Gaffer. "Do something."

The Crisis Crew Boss glanced at the factory, which was glowing with the heat. "Only one thing to do, Gaff," he said. "Shoot the factory into space."

"Space? What about Trundle?" asked Reckner.

"They can build another factory," said the Crisis Crew robot. "They can build another Trundle."

Kronkite snorted in anger.

"Get ready," said the Crisis Crew Boss.

"Right, Boss," said the Crisis Crew robot. He ran back into the skyship.

But the Crisis Crew had brought more than they bargained for. A tiny robot let go of his perch, and circled to the ground. There was a tiny puff of dust as Rota landed. His big eyes looked all around him.

Reckner and Kronkite watched as the Crisis Crew robot wheeled something out of the skyship. It looked like a dynamite plunger, with a radio dish stuck on the side. The Crisis Crew robot put his hands on the plunger. The radio dish lined up on the factory.

Kronkite knew what was going to happen. "You can't...!"

They didn't. Reckner rolled forwards, and stood in the way. "Stop! I worked in the old factory," said Reckner. "I know the tunnels back to front."

"So...?" asked the Crisis Crew Boss.

Reckner gave the Crisis Crew Boss his gold watch. "Give me five minutes," he said. "I'm going in." Reckner rolled across the factory yard.

Gaffer and the other robots watched, amazed, but Kronkite snapped out of his shock. Reckner had stopped by a manhole cover, but Kronkite ran after him. He didn't want to lose another friend.

"Reckner...stop! You're retired," said Kronkite.

"I don't do it for the money," said Reckner. He took the wangle-spanner from his tool-belt, and bent over the manhole cover. The spanner opened wider, so it fitted the big central bolt. Reckner tried to twist it, but it was very, very stiff.

Kronkite sighed. There was something he could do. He grabbed the wangle-spanner.

The robots pulled together. The bolt turned with a squeal of metal, so the lock clicked open. Reckner rolled onto the manhole cover. It began to slide down the shaft.

The Crisis Crew Boss looked at the gold watch. He pressed a button so it switched to a stop-watch. A quarter of the dial was red, for danger.

"Okay...five minutes, but that's it," said the Crisis Crew Boss. The hand started ticking round.

Rota whirled his rotor-blades and lifted off. Reckner slid lower and lower, so he vanished down the manhole. Rota flew in a circle, and dived after him.

The picture flickered on the school's black-screen. It showed nothing but static and crackle. The class stared in silence. Tweeter lowered her microphone.

"I've lost the signal," said Tweeter. "Rota's on his own."

Reckner rolled through a long, oily pipe. The dot of light from the manhole was shrinking in the distance, and the way ahead was dark. His wheels ran quickly on the smooth, hard surface. Reckner was sure he could make it.

But Reckner wasn't alone in the tunnel. He glimpsed a glint of gold as he switched on his headlamp. It was Rota, who could fly a lot faster.

Reckner smiled at the tiny robot. He didn't know where he'd come from, but any help was welcome. "Hey, little fella!" said Reckner. "It's getting hot."

The tunnel became a narrow bridge, which stretched high above the floor. It was a line of big metal rings, with a deck straight through the middle. Reckner had a good view of the lower levels. He didn't like what he could see.

The factory was a blazing furnace now. Metal gantries and panels fell from the roof. A window burst in a shower of glass. More rockets had been sparked by the terrible heat. They crackled like fireworks.

The bridge curved to the left and right. Reckner swerved round the dizzy bends. But Rota was a lot faster, and he zipped between the metal rings. Reckner gasped as he saw Rota, high above the burning boiler. Rota reached the next tunnel, way ahead of Reckner. He flew on as fast as he could.

Trundle was motionless beneath the heavy metal girder. There was no chance of escape. He was flat on his back in the basement. The factory wouldn't last much longer.

Trundle's eyes blinked sadly, as he thought of happier times. There he was with Tweeter, kicking a ball round the yard. It went up in the air, and bounced off Toggle's head. It was that time he'd broken the TV set, when the Wheeli-Ball went all funny. He didn't care about the Wheeli-Ball now.

Tweeter's face appeared in his memory, blurred and rippling like a ghost. "Dad...Mom!" said Tweeter. "Meet Rota the GyroFish!"

But Trundle couldn't go anywhere. It was an impossible dream. He was even starting to hear things. What was that buzzing sound? It must be in his head. There was even a movement of air...

Rota swooped into the basement, and landed on Trundle's nose. The tiny robot started to bleep. This couldn't be happening, thought Trundle. He snapped out of his daze. "Rota!" he gasped. "I must be moonstruck!"

There was another surprise in store. Trundle heard a clatter from down the tunnel. Rota could hear it, too. Trundle sat up a little. Rota took off from his nose.

"Hey! It's the Crisis Crew!" said Trundle. There was a faint rumble. Trundle listened. It was followed by a scraping sound.

"Over here...," called Trundle, weakly.

Trundle's voice was drowned by a ripping noise. Something burst through a sheet of crumpled metal, and rolled into the basement.

Reckner looked down at his battered friend. "Slacking on the job, Trundle?"

* * * * *

Toggle was relaxing on the sofa at home. She liked to enjoy the peace and quiet, when Trundle and Tweeter were out. There was a mop and bucket beside her. They were still soggy after a long night's work.

Toggle was listening to the gentle music which drifted from her ghetto-blaster. Suddenly, a voice cut into the broadcast. "We smash this show for a Top News Nugget!" it said. "This is Chrome Hardy and the Top News Team. Disaster strikes at Zero Rockets!"

Toggle sat up with a jolt.

* * * * *

The Crisis Crew Boss glanced at the gold watch. The hand was nearly half-way around the dial. He didn't think Reckner could make it. He was just a rusty old robot, after all.

Kronkite stared down the manhole. "Come on, Reckner," he gasped. Gaffer shook his head sadly. He didn't think Reckner had a hope.

But nobody had told Reckner. Working by the light of his headlamp, Reckner heaved the girder off Trundle. He dropped it with a mighty crash. The sound echoed up and down the tunnels. Reckner offered Trundle one of his big, heavy grippers. "Can you stand?" he asked.

"Just about," said Trundle.

Reckner took most of the weight, and helped Trundle to his feet. Trundle groaned with the effort. It was going to be a slow escape.

Reckner glanced at Rota. He was glad Rota was there. "Fly back, little'un," said Reckner. "Tell 'em we're coming!"

Rota beeped twice, and whizzed through the tunnel.

"Lucky Tweeter didn't make a DinoSlug," said Trundle.

* * * * *

Cyton's flying saucer was spinning in the sky, on the very edge of space. It was higher than the clouds of the Metal Moon, so it glinted in the sunlight. The sky above was a very dark green. There were even a few stars.

The saucer flew over the fluffy green clouds, and sliced off a wisp of vapour. It whirled through a fluffy tunnel, down into the Metal Moon sky.

Cyton admired the view from his flying saucer. The burning factory was a speck of orange, which flickered like a candle. It was an enormous building, but it looked tiny from so high up.

There were many other factories. Some were bigger than Zero Rockets. They were owned by many bosses, who all wanted to make money.

If the Crisis Crew couldn't stop the fire, there was only one thing to do. Shoot the factory into space. He would build a new one, bigger and better. He would show the other bosses...

But nothing happened. "Why are they waiting?" snarled Cyton.

The Crisis Crew Boss glanced at the gold watch. The hand was nearly in the red quarter. "Not long," he said, as the hand ticked round.

There was a slurping sound from inside a pipe. It was much thinner than the main tunnel, but it still made a handy escape route. There was a squelch, then another slurp. The blob slithered into the daylight.

"Oouuchh," hissed the blob, as it blinked in the brightness. The blob liked the murky cracks and corners, where there was plenty of muck to enjoy. It slithered across the factory yard, and off to another home.

Trundle held onto Reckner as he moved through the tunnels. The walls were shaking. Dust trickled from the roof. They reached the narrow bridge, which stretched above the boiler.

"Are we there?" groaned Trundle.

"Not yet," said Reckner. "Don't look down." Reckner wished he could fly like Rota. The bridge twisted one way, then back. It was hard to go fast.

"Not far," said Reckner. "Keep going." He heard something snap, way overhead. There was a sudden whoosh of air. "Come on!" yelled Reckner. He dragged Trundle off the bridge, into the next dark tunnel.

Reckner glanced back. The steel basher had fallen through the floor above. It smashed the bridge in half.

"Sparks above," gasped Reckner. "Just made it."

But Rota was a lot quicker. He was in the last part of the tunnel, underneath the factory yard. There was a pinpoint of light. It was the open manhole. Rota streaked towards it.

Some way back, Trundle and Reckner were struggling on. The tunnel was shaking a little more. The smoke was a thick, grey cloud. The robots didn't choke, as they didn't breathe. Only robots could work on the Metal Moon.

There was another crash. Reckner shook with a wave of fear. The roof had caved in behind them, and there was fire flaming in the tunnel. He dragged Trundle by the arm.

Trundle moaned. He couldn't go this fast, but Reckner knew they had no time to waste. They couldn't give up now.

"Not far," said Reckner, as they turned another corner. The sides of the tunnel were very old. They were made with parts which were no longer used.

Reckner had to keep Trundle's spirits up. He could still tell a yarn or two, even in tricky moments. "Haven't been here for years," said Reckner. "Built this very tunnel!"

"You did...?" said Trundle.

"Know my own handiwork," smiled Reckner. "It was fun. A real team! I remember the old Gaffer, a DowdiCell-B. We played a few crafty jokes. He was..."

Suddenly, there was a muffled explosion. The tunnel shook as if it had been hit by a meteorite. Reckner and Trundle fell backwards. Dust and smoke filled the air.

There was a moment of silence. All was dark and still. Reckner's headlamp pointed at the broken roof, with its jagged edge of metal.

Trundle grabbed a pipe on the side of the tunnel, and pulled himself off the floor. The dust was starting to clear, so he could see what had happened. A huge girder had fallen through the roof. It blocked the tunnel ahead.

Trundle looked at Reckner, who had fallen against a pile of rubble. Reckner was a big, heavy robot who could do a lot of things - but pulling himself up was not one of them.

Trundle stepped over the rubble, and offered Reckner his hand. "My turn, Reckner," said Trundle. It was time to be the rescuer, not the rescued.

But Reckner didn't stretch his gripper. He was looking at the tunnel ahead. "Wait. Look at the gap," he said.

Trundle turned to examine the way ahead. There was only a small gap above the fallen girder. It was far thicker than the one which had pinned him to the floor.

"Oh, my," gasped Trundle. He was dreading what Reckner would say.

The old robot shook his head. "I'm a HydroClutch, Trundle. We built this place. But we're big and heavy. We're on wheels."

"Help me, Reckner!" said Trundle. "Push it out the way..."

But Reckner knew it was useless. They were nearly out of time, and it was a long way back to the manhole.

"Trundle. I'm an engineer," said Reckner. "I know what's possible...and impossible."

"Reckner," gasped Trundle. "Come on..."

Reckner sighed. "I'm retired, Trundle. End of the line. Take this, get out of here..."

Reckner stretched his arm. But he didn't pull himself up. He was holding the wangle-spanner.

Trundle shook his head slowly. They gripped the spanner together. The tunnel shook with another collapse, some way back in the distance.

Trundle's eyes closed for a moment. He could see a blurry picture of Tweeter's face. Her voice echoed in his head. "Daddy..."

Trundle found a new wave of energy. He knew what he had to do. He took the wangle-spanner, and scrambled over the girder. Trundle ran as fast as he could.

Reckner was alone in the tunnel...but he knew Trundle would make it. Reckner smiled to himself. He was happy.

* * * * *

One of the factory chimneys made a terrible groan. "Stand away!" yelled the Crisis Crew robot. The chimney collapsed in a cloud of smoke.

The gold watch kept ticking away. The hand was now in the red, so there wasn't much time to go.

The Crisis Crew Boss chucked the watch aside. "We can't wait," he said. The Boss glanced at the Crisis Crew robot, who took hold of the plunger.

Kronkite was leaning over the manhole cover. He was looking very worried. Kronkite was sure he could hear something, but it didn't sound like Reckner. Suddenly, Rota shot past his head.

Now Rota was clear of the tunnels, he could send Tweeter a clear signal. The fuzz on the black-screen flickered, and a picture flashed up.

Tweeter gasped.

She could see Rota's view as he flew across the factory yard. He was racing towards the Crisis Crew robot, who had his hands on the plunger. Tweeter whipped up her microphone. "Go, Rota, go!" she yelled.

Rota flew straight at the Crisis Crew robot's face. The robot let go of the plunger and toppled backwards.

Gaffer and some other robots had joined Kronkite at the manhole. They all peered down into the darkness, waiting for someone to come. Gaffer touched Kronkite's shoulder. "I'm sorry, lad," said Gaffer, quietly. "Reckner did his best."

"What do you care?" growled Kronkite. "You threw him out."

Gaffer shook his head. "It wasn't me," he said. "It was the boss. My boss..."

But Kronkite had heard enough. He leant forward, and tried to see into the shadows. "Trundle...?" he called, weakly.

The Crisis Crew robot was swatting at Rota, who was flying around his head. "Creepy-crawly!" whined the Crisis Crew robot, who hated anything which crept or crawled. It might have been a tiny problem, but it stopped him reaching the plunger.

But the Crisis Crew Boss was scared of nothing. At least, he wasn't scared of creepy-crawlies. He strolled over to the plunger and took a firm grip of the handle.

Kronkite stared hard down the manhole. He couldn't see anything, but he could hear something. Something moving in the dark...

There were footsteps shuffling in the tunnel. They were slow and tired, as if they could hardly go any further. Suddenly, Trundle stumbled into view.

The manhole cover started to rise, but Kronkite didn't wait. He stretched his arms. So did Gaffer. They grabbed Trundle and dragged him clear of the hole.

"Good work," said Kronkite. Gaffer nodded. They put Trundle's arms round their shoulders, as he couldn't walk any more.

The Crisis Crew Boss pressed the plunger. There was an almighty boom, and the ground started to shake. Kronkite and Gaffer carried Trundle, while the other robots ran away.

The factory was rising into the sky. The sides were painted in robot numbers, and covered with tiny rivets.

Most of the factory had been underground. There were twisted pipes, tangled tunnels and a huge, steaming boiler. This had caused all the trouble. It glowed with incredible heat.

The factory had massive rockets at the bottom. They were blazing with yellow flame. The yard was filled with thick black smoke, and the noise cracked the ground.

* * * * *

Toggle was still at home in the suburban saucer. She gripped her ghetto-blaster, as the suspense was far too much. All she could hear was the roar of the rocket engines, as they lifted the factory high in the sky.

Tweeter's class watched the black-screen, as Rota was still sending pictures. They saw the factory vanish into the clouds. No-one said a thing.

Way, way above - on the edge of space - Cyton gazed through the windows of his flying saucer. The factory rose up with a distant roar, leaving a trail of smoke behind. Cyton wriggled his silver tentacles. "Heh! That's a mighty big firework," he said.

The factory streaked away from the Metal Moon, towards the gigantic planet of Multichrome. It was a tiny pinpoint of light against the swirling clouds. The factory exploded in a quick flash of yellow.

The black-screen showed nothing but drifting smoke. Tweeter watched. She was silent and scared.

The smoke cleared. Tweeter gasped. She could see a familiar figure. Trundle! Rota flew right up to his face, so he looked big on the screen.

"I'm okay, Tweeter," said Trundle.

Tweeter smiled. The class cheered.

Toggle had her ear to the ghetto-blaster. She was desperate to hear what was happening. Then Toggle heard a welcome voice. "This is Chrome Hardy," it said. "I don't believe it! Trundle's safe and sound!"

Toggle grabbed her mop, and cuddled it with joy.

Over in the Play Park, the Crisis Crew did their job. Cog and Ratchit were lifted off the climbing frame. They were soon safe inside the skyship. Rota flew around the Play Park, filming every second. Maybe it would teach them a thing or two.

Everything was quiet in the factory yard. There was a big hole where the factory had been, and black smoke rose in the sky. A few robots stood by the edge. They stared into the murky depths.

Gaffer was one of the robots. He felt a little dizzy. The hole went down and down into the Metal Moon, and faded into darkness. The sides were dotted with round tunnels. They had joined those in the factory.

But Trundle kept away from the crowd. He wanted to be alone. He was safe now. He'd see his family again. But there was another family, waiting for Stoke. Stoke would never come home.

Trundle saw something glimmering on the ground. He walked across the yard, bent down and picked up the object.

It was the gold watch given to Reckner, by Cyton Zero of Zero Rockets. It was droopy and melting, like it was made of jelly. That's just how Trundle felt. He dropped with a crash of tired metal. Everything went black.

* * * * *

All was black for a moment. Then there was a flicker of light. Trundle's blueprints flashed up on a computer screen, with all his inner workings.

It showed the wires and chips in his metal head, and the mechanical parts of his body. It showed his battery, and the links in his arms and legs which made him a strong worker.

Trundle was being scanned from every angle, prodded and probed. His head was dented and circuits shook up. But the worst was over. Trundle was safe.

"Dad was pretty beat after that," said Tweeter, "so they took him to Dr. Neon. The factory gave him time off. They had to. They didn't have a factory anymore."

Dr. Neon was a clean white robot, with a neon light on his head. His job was to fix robots. Trundle was flat on his back, though not on the floor. He was laying on a soft, sloping bed. Dr. Neon prodded him with a long, silver probe. Trundle's blueprints flashed up on a computer screen, as Dr. Neon worked out what to do.

"Stress, stress, stress...the curse of life!" said Dr. Neon. "What you need is a vacation!"

"Which is fine if you've got the money," said Tweeter. "Which we didn't. Until..."

A silver envelope popped through the letterbox. Toggle picked it up and opened it. She read the letter inside.

"No!" gasped Toggle. It couldn't be true. "Hey, Trundle!" she yelled. "You've won the Spot the Wheeli-Ball competition!"

"Guess we needed the luck," smiled Tweeter.

* * * * *

The robots had loads of glossy brochures, which they spread on the table, chairs and floor. There were thousands of places to choose from.

"It took hours to find what we wanted," said Tweeter. "Camping on an asteroid? No - might be a little dull. A rocket tour round the galaxy? No - we wouldn't have time to stop. Then Mom found the perfect place..."

Toggle opened yet another brochure, and gazed at the scenes inside. It looked like a wonderful place, full of colour and fun. So different from the grim, dirty world of the Metal Moon.

"The seaside planet of Beach Ball!" said Toggle, as she tapped the glossy page. "Sun, sea, sand...no factories," she smiled, "and Vick Void's staying there!"

Toggle imagined a picture of the radio star. He was floating in a glowing pink heart. Vick was a shiny robot with a sleek silver head. He was neat, clean and tidy. Vick had a twist of metal like a bright bow-tie, and a flashy metal jacket.

"Looks lovely," said Tweeter.

So Tweeter could see him too. How marvellous! "Yes, he does...!" said Toggle in a dreamy voice.

"Who? I mean the brochure," said Tweeter.

Toggle's heart-throb image popped as Tweeter jumped over. She grabbed the Beach Ball brochure.

Trundle looked up from his armchair. He had a few dents and scratches, but he felt a lot better. "Anywhere quiet," said Trundle. "I want to switch off in peace."

"But not too quiet," said Tweeter. She held up the brochure and gazed at the cover. It showed a brilliant blue planet with a spectacular ring. The islands were green and yellow.

"Something for everyone," said Toggle.

"The perfect place," said Tweeter.

"Hmmm. Do they have...slot machines?" asked Trundle.

Tweeter held the picture up to her face. She moved it closer and closer. It looked so big, like a real planet. She was on her way...

* * * * *

The space liner was blue and white. It gleamed with a thousand portholes. The liner raced towards the planet Beach Ball. Tweeter was on her way.

The cabin was bigger than a cinema, and filled with many other passengers. Most had joined the trip at the Zeta-Link Junction. Tweeter peeped over the top of the seats. She was amazed at what she could see.

There was a furry purple cone with its little child, a small furry purple cone. There was a group of red stripy aliens with loud voices and short, stubby tails. There were humans with crazy hairstyles in wild costumes, and a yellow octopus who didn't like the water. Gleaming Air Hostess robots glided up and down, seeing to every need.

"Fasten your seat belts," said one of the Air Hostesses. "Landing in five-point-five metric minutes."

Toggle, Trundle and Tweeter were sitting by a window. Trundle was in snooze mode, asleep, so Toggle did up his belt. He'd missed the stunning views of space, but he needed time to recover. She was so glad to have him there.

Soon, the space liner was sitting in the spaceport. The air lock slid open, and the passengers walked down a gangway. A sign had a single sentence in many types of lettering, including squiggles, shapes and shades. But there was one line the robots could read. 'Welcome to Beach Ball', it said.

Toggle, Trundle and Tweeter walked across the spaceport. They were looking for the way out. Each had a suitcase in their own colours...green, brown and pink.

Anywhere was better than the Metal Moon. Tweeter had quite a story to tell. "We saw some very strange creatures at the space port," she said. "Some walking, some slithering, some gliding past - but all here to soak up the twin yellow suns."

One sun was the brightest, while the other was a lot smaller. The big sun shone in the daytime.

The robots arrived at a smart hotel. The building was a brilliant white, with balconies and a grand entrance. Toggle and Tweeter jumped out of the lift. They rushed into the room.

The carpet was blue and swirly, like the sea. The chairs were as soft as clouds. The air was kept fresh with cool sea breezes, and the walls were decorated with luminous sea-shells.

Best of all was the big, wide window, which looked out over the town. Toggle and Tweeter gazed in delight. They could see the gleaming white buildings, the silver-blue sea, and palm trees rippling in the breeze. It was so different from the Metal Moon, with its green skies and filthy chimneys.

Toggle was enchanted. "Beautiful," she sighed.

But Tweeter heard a thump and a groan. She glanced back at the door. Trundle struggled in with all three cases. He dropped them on the floor.

"You okay, shiny?" asked Toggle.

"Got to get my strength back," said Trundle.

Tweeter opened her small pink case. She hadn't brought a lot with her. Just another robot who'd earned a vacation. "Hi, Rota!" she smiled. "Welcome to Beach Ball!"

The sky was blue. It was the bluest blue that Tweeter had ever seen. The leaves of a palm tree rippled in the breeze, and a fluffy cloud floated in the air.

Tweeter was looking up at the palm tree. The leaves were soft and frilly. Tweeter wagged her finger. She was quite annoyed.

"Rota! Rota! I won't tell you again," yelled Tweeter. "Come down, or I'll turn you into a...DinoSlug!"

Tweeter heard a whirring sound as something stirred. Rota the GyroFish flew down from the palm leaves, and settled on her finger. Tweeter tickled Rota under the chin. "There, there," she said. "Don't worry. I didn't mean it."

Maybe Tweeter had said the wrong thing. Rota bleeped and took off again. She saw a glimmer of gold as he buzzed down the beach. "Rota!" yelled Tweeter. But Rota didn't listen.

Rota zipped over the sunbathing tourists. "Creepy-crawly!" said one of them, but Rota was too fast to catch. He flew towards an amazing sandcastle, which had towers and turrets at incredible angles. They should have fallen down, but they hadn't. It was the work of a sandcastle king.

Rota dodged between the sandy towers. His rotor-blades skimmed the walls. Rota was great at stunts like this, so he didn't knock anything down.

Toggle was sitting in a deckchair, enjoying the sandy beach. She was reading her book of robot love stories. It had a steel heart on the cover.

Trundle was laying on a stripy beach towel. He was wearing a pair of yellow heart-shaped sunglasses. Rota's shadow passed over him, and Tweeter's feet scampered past.

Trundle didn't move a metal muscle, but Tweeter had stirred something. There was a ripple of movement in the stripy towel. A lizard crept away. Its skin colour changed from stripes to sand, so it was very hard to see.

The promenade was a lively place. It ran between the beach and seafront. It was wide and sunny, with lots of rippling palm trees. There was a bandstand with decorated columns, and a long pier sticking out to sea.

All kinds of tourists relaxed on the promenade. There was the furry purple cone with its little child, a small furry purple cone. There was a man in a silver spacesuit who hated the salty sea air, and a woman with a big pink hairdo. It was just like a candy-floss.

Two red stripy creatures were taking a walk, and a girl glided by in a huge yellow dress. The dress blew air from underneath, just like a hovercraft.

Tweeter ran onto the promenade. She stopped, and had a look around. "Rota? Rota?" sighed Tweeter. "Oh...never mind." There was so much to do and see.

Tweeter strolled over to refreshment kiosk. She knew robots couldn't eat anything - but she was curious, even so. They sold lots of weird and wonderful things, like soft rock, candy snow and fruit bubbles.

The ice cones looked the best, thought Tweeter. They were cones of pure coloured ice, which were licked like lollies. They came in wonderful flavours like sloopskin, jellibarb and mellobean.

Two orange kid aliens stopped by the kiosk. They wore yellow and purple shorts, with silver diving gear on their backs. The kids wanted to cool down, so they chose the flavours they wanted.

One of the kid aliens paid with a shiny Beach Ball coin. The Octo-Vendor took the money with his long, green tentacles. He fetched the ice cones at the same time. He had plenty of tentacles. The kid aliens licked the ice cones and scampered away.

Tweeter glanced at a chart of flavours. "Shame robots can't eat ice cones," she said. They looked delicious.

But the Octo-Vendor was listening. "We thought of that," he said. "Fancy a nice chilled oil shake?" A tentacle snaked down with a fancy oil-can. It had a straw sticking out the top.

Tweeter took the can and sucked the straw. "Mmmm. That's chilly!" she smiled. Cool, black oil, as smooth as silk. It was delicious...for a robot.

* * * * *

The sky was blue. It was the bluest blue...

If Trundle had opened his eyes, he would have seen the deep, blue sky. Then he would have seen Toggle's face looming over him. Toggle was holding her instant snapshot camera. She clicked the shutter button.

A photo whirred from the bottom of the camera, and developed in Toggle's hand. It was a picture of Trundle dozing on the beach. His eyes were hidden behind the yellow heart-shaped sunglasses. Toggle nodded to herself. She was pleased.

There was another robot, not far away. He was feeling even better. Kwif was a black and silver robot, who liked to look good. He had a sleek, metal quiff on top of his head. It looked like a quiff of hair.

Kwif liked his metal quiff. He liked his motorised unicycle even more. The unicycle was his pride and joy. Kwif loved riding it along the promenade.

The unicycle looked like a chopper bike, but with only one wheel. This was stuck on the end of a long, springy spike. There were seats at the back, and wide handlebars. The unicycle had fins on each side, to keep it balanced.

Kwif's unicycle was black, with silver trimmings. It was just like Kwif himself. Unicycles were tricky to ride, but Kwif was a real expert.

Kwif patted his unicycle. He spoke to the passers-by. "Hey...nice machine. Best on Beach Ball," said Kwif. "Fancy a ride, honey? No, not you, sir. Yeah...it's a nice machine."

There was a vroom-vroom sound. Kwif froze. It was someone he didn't like.

Another unicycle came to a stop. Ledd was the proud owner. His unicycle was covered with badges, and painted a glittering scarlet.

Ledd glared at Kwif's unicycle. "Nice pile of wreckage," he sneered.

"You mean, nice machine?" sneered Kwif.

"I mean what I say," said Ledd.

Kwif scowled. "It's not a wreck," he said.

Ledd snorted. "That can be arranged..."

Ledd stroked his own unicycle. "Look at the shine on this!" he said. "The mirrors, the lights. I call it style."

Ledd flipped out two sparkling wing mirrors. They were studded with gems. He winked a fancy set of headlamps.

"No, Ledd," said Kwif. "It's tacky. I've got a cool, black unicycle. A real machine! You've got a kiddies' tinker toy."

Ledd revved up his engine. "Listen to the music, Kwif," he said. "That's no toy."

"You're right," said Kwif. "It's dangerous to play with junk."

Ledd glared at Kwif. "This ain't playing..."

Ledd zipped his unicycle in a tight circle round Kwif, who watched in cool amusement. After three fast circles, Ledd stopped where he'd started.

"Feeling dizzy...?" asked Ledd.

"Dizzy? Watch this!" said Kwif.

Kwif revved up his unicycle, so it started spinning like a top. He circled Ledd once, and came to a stop. "Now, that's dizzy," said Kwif.

Ledd glared at Kwif. "Yeah?"

Kwif pointed across the promenade. "Yeah!"

Tweeter was standing a short way off. Her eyes were spinning round and round. Tweeter clapped her hands, so they rattled to a halt.

"Brilliant!" smiled Tweeter.

"Who?" asked Ledd.

"Both of you!" said Tweeter. But this didn't please anyone.

"But who's the best?" asked Kwif.

"The very best?" asked Ledd.

"And who's a junk pile?" asked Kwif.

"Both of you!" said Tweeter.

Kwif and Ledd glanced at each other. Then they frowned at Tweeter. It wasn't nice to be frowned at.

Tweeter waved her arms. She'd made a fool of herself. "I mean...you're both the best, silly!" said Tweeter.

Kwif rolled forward on his unicycle. "But who's the real best?" he asked.

Ledd rolled forward on his unicycle. "The very, very best?" he asked.

"You could prove it, Miss," said Kwif. "Come for a spin."

Tweeter gasped. A spin...on a unicycle? She didn't like the idea. It sounded very dangerous.

"Sorry. I'd rather go for a swim!" said Tweeter. She could only sink, but they didn't know that. Tweeter had lots to keep her busy. Rota flew past behind her.

* * * * *

The sky glowed orange as the big sun set. The clouds were like purple foam. It was an hour before the smaller sun shone. It was never very dark on Beach Ball.

The cities sparkled with a million lights, and airships drifted overhead. Signs flashed with colourful adverts. The clubs and bars were buzzing.

The hotel was tinted by the evening sun. An amber light sliced through the windows, casting a warm glow into the rooms. Toggle had placed her photos on the mantelpiece, like a little exhibition.

The first was the photo of Trundle, laying on the beach. Another showed Tweeter riding a huge creature. It had green slimy skin, no legs, and a mouth with a hundred teeth. It didn't bite anyone, though.

"I rode a tame DinoSlug along the promenade," said Tweeter. She remembered the fun she'd had. "Not only did I get a very good view, it hummed my favourite tunes."

The next photo showed Trundle, Toggle and Tweeter by a huge TV screen. They could see themselves much larger than life, but looking a bit different. There was a factory worker in brown clothes, a plump woman in a green dress and a little girl in a pink dress.

"We loved the fun-fair, and the Hall of Video Mirrors," said Tweeter. "It was strange to see ourselves looking like humans!"

But Tweeter had things to do, so she vanished into her bedroom.

The TV was burbling away, just like it did on the Metal Moon. Trundle was sitting in an armchair watching the news. A robot reporter had the latest scoop. Pictures flashed up as he spoke.

"...who is wanted in over fifty-five star systems for gambling fraud, planet fiddling and sneaky funny voices."

A map flashed up on the TV screen. The report continued.

"Springer dodged the guards and escaped in a stolen jumper-jet. Police followed to the Zeta-Link Junction, but struck a void and the trail went cold. The only clue is a sun-hat Springer bought at the Zeta Swipe-Store. He may be heading to the jungle world of Ara, even the seaside planet Beach Ball. This report, Ticker Tinrod, police control."

The picture switched back to the newsreader. Trundle perked up as he spoke. "And news just in. Think you could grow the biggest palooka-plant in the cosmos? Not when you've seen the prize palooka by Mrs. Ivy Woo of Mexi-Whirl City. It's so big, they're raising the roof! Eco Hawker with this report..."

Eco Hawker flashed up on the screen. "I've never..."

Click! Eco Hawker was gone.

Trundle stirred in his armchair. "Hey! That was getting good," he said. Toggle had switched off the TV.

Toggle shook her head. "We didn't come to watch TV, Trundle," she said. "What about the cabaret?"

"What's that?" asked Trundle.

Toggle sighed. Trundle was missing out, so she mimed the delights.

"Music...magic...comedy...dance. The whole caboodle," she said.

"Oeer...", groaned Trundle. He rubbed his head. It didn't sound very relaxing.

But Toggle was having none of it. She yanked Trundle out of his armchair, and whipped out a small tin. Trundle almost slumped back in his seat. But he knew when Toggle meant business.

Toggle nodded. She did mean business. She also had a small brush. Toggle started polishing Trundle's face.

"Think! We could meet Vick Void, the Silver Voicebox!" said Toggle. "He's here on vacation, remember?"

Trundle winced as Toggle scrubbed him with the brush.

Toggle called over to a doorway, which was covered by a curtain. "Come on, Tweeter," she said. "Get smart!"

Tweeter's head popped round the curtain. She placed a magnetic ribbon on top of her head, which made her look very pretty. "But we don't know what Vick Void looks like," said Tweeter. "We've only heard him on the radio."

"I can imagine," said Toggle. "Must be the smoothest, smartest, shiniest robot..."

For a second, Toggle could see the heart-throb image of Vick Void. He looked as good as before. She wanted to gaze into his eyes forever, but the image popped as Tweeter spoke.

"But that's dumb, Mom," said Tweeter. "Might be an ugly-mug." Tweeter imagined a gawky-looking robot. He was floating in a wobbly heart. The gawky robot waved in a clumsy manner. The image popped as Toggle spoke.

"No! Take this," said Toggle. She gave Tweeter her camera. "Pop down to the Cabaret Lounge, and if you see him - snap him."

Tweeter wasn't sure. "But..."

Toggle wasn't listening. "I'm busy, Tweeter!" she snapped. "Off you go."

* * * * *

There was a row of seedy brick arches beneath the Beach Ball promenade. It was a spot the tourists didn't see. The sea washed the beach with a gentle hiss. It wasn't very far away.

There were heaps of rope, barrels and an old, rotten boat. This was home to a small group of lobsters. It was covered in green seaweed.

The arches were dark. All except one, which had a dim yellow light in the window. There was a black and silver unicycle parked inside. This was Kwif's arch. His home.

The place was full of crates, boxes and unicycle spares. Two robots were talking in a pool of light.

Springer was a lanky robot. A natty cad! A crook with the style of a gentleman. Springer was a very smart villain, who spoke in a very posh voice. Even so, he had a sun-hat low over his eyes. Springer didn't want to be noticed.

"...anyway, it was a splendid game of cops and robbers," said Springer. "I'm proud to be a robber, Kwif. Quickest way to get rich!"

Kwif wasn't so sure. "But not if you're caught, Springer," he said.

"I've not been caught," smiled Springer. "I'll never be caught."

"Hmmm. How long you staying on Beach Ball?" asked Kwif.

"Oh - just a short vacation," said Springer. "Clean out the casino, the slot machines, then shoot with the money! Fancy a night on the town?"

Kwif still wasn't sure. "They're after you, Springer," he said. "It was on the news. They said you'd bought a sun-hat."

"Who needs a silly old sun-hat?" sneered Springer. He whipped it off his head.

Springer had only worn the hat for disguise. It was far too bright and flowery. Springer had a smart, triangular trilby underneath. It was part of his metal head.

"Come on, Kwif. Get smart!" said Springer. He fixed a long magnetic moustache under his nose. "There! I'm the perfect gentleman."

* * * * *

The evening's fun was warming up, down in the Cabaret Lounge. It was the biggest part of the hotel. There were lots of little round tables, pot plants and a brightly-lit stage. A small band was playing quiet, jazzy music.

Tweeter was sitting alone at a round table. She raised the snapshot camera, peered through the viewfinder and looked at the other tables. There were aliens and humans enjoying food, drink and chat.

Tweeter's camera settled on a nearby robot. It was Springer, complete with magnetic moustache. He also had gold cuff-links, a gold bracelet, and was highly polished for his night on the town.

"I don't know what Vick Void looks like," said Tweeter. "Mom wants a photo, so what can I do? Better keep her happy. Snap anyone smart..."

Tweeter pressed the shutter. There was a click. The photo whirred out of the camera and developed in her hand. It showed Springer sitting at his table, with the jazz band behind him.

"That'll do!" said Tweeter.

But Kwif wasn't very far away. He walked up behind Tweeter, and peered over her shoulder. "That's a good one," said Kwif.

Tweeter jumped. She was little startled. "Oh!"

Kwif didn't want to scare her. "We meet again, Miss...?"

"Tweeter," said Tweeter.

Kwif nodded. But he had a serious question. "And why are you taking secret photos..."

"...of Vick Void?" added Tweeter.

Kwif was a bit confused. Who was Vick Void? What was going on? Kwif agreed with Tweeter, just to hear what she would say. "Vick...Void?" he asked. "Ah! The Silver Voicebox!"

"Sure! Mom's one of his biggest fans," said Tweeter. "Listens to his show every night...when he's not on vacation."

"Mmmm," nodded Kwif. He was beginning to understand. "Listen, Tweeter. I know Vick," he said. "Would you like to come and meet him?"

"You mean...it really is?" gasped Tweeter.

"Yep!" said Kwif. "And he loves having photos taken."

The truth was completely different. Springer had a thousand disguises and funny voices. They kept him safe and unknown.

Springer was studying a postcard of the seaside town. He had plans to make big money. Springer marked a few places with an 'X'.

"Some rich pickings," murmured Springer. "But what about the getaway? Hmmm..."

But Tweeter rushed ahead of Kwif. Springer jumped in surprise. "Wow! Hi, Mr. Void," said Tweeter. "Glad to meet The Silver Voicebox!"

Springer gulped, and hid the postcard. Who was this crazy robot? She couldn't see his secret plans.

Tweeter held out her hand. Springer was startled. He didn't know what to say, so he just went "ahhh...?"

Kwif had to think quickly. If he was right - and he might be - they had a chance to make a lot of money.

Tweeter smiled at Springer. Springer was lost for words.

Kwif knew what Springer had to say. He tried to give him a clue. "Yes, Vick!" said Kwif. "You're here on vacation, aren't you? You've come for the peace and quiet." Kwif nodded at Springer, hoping he'd get the point.

Springer still didn't know what was going on. But he didn't have much choice. "Oh - that's right!" he said. "Glad to meet you, Miss! Vick can't a-Void the fans!"

Kwif forced a laugh, and Springer shook Tweeter's hand. But Tweeter wasn't so sure. "He doesn't sound like Vick," she said.

Springer leaned towards Kwif. "How does he sound?" asked Springer. He never listened to The Vick Void Show.

Kwif decided to ignore Springer, or he'd only mess things up. Instead, he spoke straight to Tweeter. "Oh - Vick's resting his voicebox, Tweeter," said Kwif. "Can't sound silver all the time!"

"That's right!" said Springer, with a twitch of his magnetic moustache. He was beginning to feel the part.

"Here, take some better photos!" said Kwif. He nudged Tweeter round the table, so she had a better view. Springer smiled at Tweeter. She raised her camera with glee.

* * * * *

Trundle and Toggle were up in the hotel room, getting ready for the cabaret. Actually, Toggle was getting ready - but she made sure Trundle did too. The work had been worth it. They looked extra smart and shiny.

Toggle fixed a magnetic bow-tie on Trundle, and a small magnetic flower on herself. "There! What a lovely couple!" she said. Toggle could see their reflection in the TV screen. She'd kept the telly off, too.

Rota was perched on a nearby lamp, with his rotor-blades folded neatly. He jiggled in agreement.

Tweeter was still down in the Cabaret Lounge. She was snapping pictures of Springer. He struck a variety of poses as the camera flashed. They were stiff and serious, stupid and silly.

Springer pinged his magnetic moustache. Tweeter took her last shot. "Thanks, Mr. Void," said Tweeter.

"My pleasure," said Springer.

A stream of photos whirred from the bottom of the camera. They landed on the table, and developed in an instant. Springer picked one up and admired it.

"That's a good one," said Springer. It was a beaming close-up of his face.

"You can have it!" said Tweeter. She was very proud.

"Thanks very much," said Springer.

"But sign one for me," added Tweeter.

"One? I'll sign the lot!" smiled Springer.

Springer took out a flashy pen. "'Best wishes, Vick Void'," he said, as he squiggled on a photo. "'Stay tuned, Vick Void'," he said, as he squiggled on another. Springer was starting to enjoy this.

"Not too long, Spring...ah, Mr. Void," said Kwif. "Don't want to strain that voicebox." Tweeter had believed them so far, but Kwif didn't want to take chances. Anyway, the real Vick Void was a superstar. He wouldn't waste time like this.

"Ah...yes, the voicebox," purred Springer, as he signed the photos at lightning speed. "There you are, Tweeter. Glad to meet a fan." Springer gave her the last photo.

"See you on the beach, Tweeter," said Kwif. "Take that spin on the unicycle."

"Okay!" said Tweeter. "Wait till I show Mom!" She picked up her photos and wandered off.

But Springer still had a photo. Kwif took a good look. There was Springer's gleaming face with its magnetic moustache. Or was it...the face of a superstar? Vick Void, the Silver Voicebox!

"Sign it for me, Mr. Void," said Kwif.

"Why? Have you gone mad?" asked Springer.

"Shhh!" hissed Kwif. "I've got an idea."

"A money-making idea?" asked Springer.

"What else?" said Kwif.

Springer lifted his pen. "Glad to meet a fan!" he smiled.

Tweeter came out of the Cabaret Lounge, and crossed the hotel lobby. She was looking at her photos, not where she was going.

A maid came round the corner a short way ahead. The maid was painted black, with silver frills. She had a silver frilly cap on her head. The maid was another robot.

The maid was pushing a big silver trolley. It ran smoothly on the blue, swirly carpet. Tweeter nearly bumped into the trolley, but the maid honked a gentle-sounding horn.

"Whoops - sorry!" said Tweeter.

"No problem, Miss," said the maid.

Tweeter walked round the trolley. She was still looking at the photos. "Vick Void!" said Tweeter. "I don't believe it!"

Tweeter started climbing the staircase, up to the hotel room. As she disappeared round the corner, the lift doors opened downstairs. There was Trundle and Toggle, gleaming at their best. They stepped out into the lobby as the maid pushed the trolley past.

"Looks grand!" said Trundle, as he admired the place. There were huge lights made from crystal coral, golden mirrors and potted palms.

"It's only the lobby," said Toggle. She was more used to glamour and glitz, but only in her dreams. Her robot love stories were full of palaces and knights. Toggle wished she was a robot queen.

Toggle gave Trundle a gentle tug, and the robots strolled across the carpet. Their heavy metal feet left a trail of marks, but the carpet was very springy. The marks soon vanished, like footprints on a beach.

A calm, peaceful melody drifted from the Cabaret Lounge. There was a poster by the door, with a picture of a gleaming robot. Someone had signed the photo.

Toggle took a closer look. It was a weird squiggle, like a galaxy and a star. Toggle read it with glee.

"There he is!" she gasped. "The one and only Vick! What a springy moustache! He's no ugly-mug."

Trundle pointed at the poster. "What's all this?" he asked. "A talent show..."

"Top prizes," said Toggle, "and Vick Void's the judge!"

Trundle wasn't very bothered, but Toggle jiggled in delight. "We've got to enter, Trundle," she said. "Fancy a song and dance?"

Trundle rubbed his head. "Oeer...", he groaned. He didn't fancy anything of the kind.

The band inside the Cabaret Lounge changed their tune. They began a more lively number. Toggle took Trundle firmly by the arm. "Come on! The cabaret!" she said. "We'll get some ideas..."

"Hope it doesn't get noisy," said Trundle.

Toggle led Trundle towards the door, and whispered in his ear. "Think of the magic...the comedy...the dance!"

"I'm not dancing," said Trundle.

"They've got dancers, silly!" said Toggle. The robots vanished into the Cabaret Lounge.

But there was somebody left in the hotel lobby. They peeped round a column. Kwif grinned at Springer. "Seems you've got a couple of fans!"

* * * * *

"Mom...Dad! Anyone here?" yelled Tweeter. She waved the photographs, and looked around the room. But the place was empty. Even so, Tweeter heard a bleep in the corner. It was Rota, who was sitting on a lamp. "Hi, Rota. Just you and me," said Tweeter. She flopped onto the super-soft sofa.

Trundle had left his heart-shaped sunglasses on the arm of the sofa. Tweeter toyed with them for a moment. They looked a bit funny on Trundle, but maybe they would suit her.

Tweeter put on the sunglasses. She gasped. Everything looked different. Cool and blue.

Tweeter gazed through the wide, sweeping window, high above the city lights. The sky was a twinkling void, and the clouds were a deep purple. The smaller sun had risen now, although it looked a lot like a star.

What a beautiful view, thought Tweeter. The star gave a shimmering glow to the night sky, so Beach Ball was never very dark. The planet's ring was a pale white rainbow, rising behind the clouds. It was so much better than the Metal Moon, with its dull and dingy nights.

But there was another type of void, called Vick, who wasn't up in space. "Nice sky, Rota," said Tweeter. "You'll never guess who I saw..."

* * * * *

The big yellow sun was shining in the sky, and the promenade was bustling with tourists. It was another fun-filled day on the planet Beach Ball.

The seafront had a lot of things to do and see. Some were spectacular, some were strange. There was something strange between the hotel and bandstand. It was a mysterious purple tent.

Two hands moved across a glittering crystal ball. They wore gold rings, and had long purple nails. They belonged to Lyza Lite, who was a hundred years old. She was a teller of fortunes, and giver of good advice.

"I see stars spinning in the void of space," whispered Lyza. "I see...a drip, a trickle...a shower of gold!"

The tent was cool and shady. It was lit by flickering oil-globes. Trundle was sitting on a stool, spellbound, as the fortune teller glanced up at him.

Lyza Lite had an elf-like face and purple hair, which swept back like a bunch of feathers. She wore a purple cloak with blue spots, which matched the colour of the tent. Her gold bangles rattled, her ear-rings twinkled. The crystal ball sparkled with yellow and silver stars.

Trundle hunched forward. He was keen to know more. "You mean...I'm going to get lucky?" asked Trundle.

"I see luck...and trouble," said Lyza.

"More trouble than luck?" asked Trundle.

"No," said the fortune teller. She stared at the crystal ball. The sparkling stars turned into spinning coins.

"Well - that settles it, Lass!" said Trundle. "I'm off to the slot machines!"

Trundle came out of the purple tent, and marched down the promenade. He was feeling positive now.

Just then, Tweeter shot by on a skateboard. She weaved in and out of the tourists. Tweeter was wearing Trundle's yellow heart-shaped sunglasses. She'd taken quite a fancy to them.

But Tweeter wasn't alone for long. Someone chugged up beside her. It was Kwif, on his black and silver unicycle.

"Call that a vehicle?" said Kwif. He scowled at the skateboard.

"Hi, Kwif," said Tweeter, cheerfully.

"Fancy a spin?" said Kwif.

Tweeter didn't waste any time. Her feet jumped off the skateboard, although the yellow sunglasses slipped off her nose. Tweeter rode off on Kwif's unicycle. They left a puff of dust behind them.

The sunglasses had landed on the skateboard, so they looked like a pair of eyes. But something very strange happened. The skateboard rolled on with a life of its own. It was glad to be free at last.

* * * * *

Trundle was in the Games Arcade, staring in amazement. It was a dazzling, incredible place. There was lots of bleeping and flashing, and the slot machines clattered away. There were so many knobs and levers, it was a bit like the rocket factory.

"That's more like it!" said Trundle. The place was very crowded. Trundle moved through the maze of machines.

Springer popped out from behind a column. He was still wearing his magnetic moustache, but he had another hat. There was a checked cap low over his eyes.

Springer approached a slot machine. He peered at the inner workings. There was a waterfall of money, with scoops to catch the coins. Whenever the coins fell over the edge, the scoops were somewhere else.

Springer shoved a coin in the slot. The machine started bleeping. Springer glanced around, but no-one was watching. "Easy-peasy," he said.

Springer took out a tiny control box, and turned a knob. The scoops started swinging from side to side. Springer cackled. They were catching loads of coins. The lights flashed like crazy. The machine made a happy noise.

Springer smiled, and took off his cap. Coins spurted from the money chute. Springer caught them all.

Trundle had found another machine. He shoved a coin in the slot. It was just like snakes and ladders, with money instead of counters.

Trundle's coin went up a ladder, along a few squares, then up another ladder. "It's my lucky day!" said Trundle.

Trundle's coin went up another ladder. He was very, very lucky. Just a few squares to go! But a cartoon snake wriggled into view. It licked its lips with a red, forked tongue.

"Uh-oh," sighed Trundle. This wasn't so good.

The cartoon snake wriggled up a ladder, with a mean look in its eyes. It opened its mouth and swallowed the coin.

Trundle watched his coin slide down the long, green belly. The snake went "burp!" and wriggled away. The machine made a grumpy noise.

"Dohhh," groaned Trundle.

But there was someone else watching Trundle. It was just like the rocket factory. There were TV cameras looking down from the ceiling. They could see each and every move.

Upstairs, in Arcade Control, there were loads of TV screens. They all showed different views. The Arcade Boss sniggered at Trundle. "Heh! Another mug!" he said.

* * * * *

There was a roar of power, and a gleam of silver. Kwif was racing his unicycle along the promenade. Tweeter was hanging on tight, while the tourists jumped out of the way.

"Slow down!" yelled Tweeter.

Kwif didn't listen. "Watch this!"

Kwif pulled back the handlebars. The unicycle jumped onto the railing. It was just like a monorail track.

"Whoohah...!" yelled Tweeter. The railing curved this way and that, as it followed the shape of the beach. Tweeter felt dizzy again.

A cat-like alien was sitting on the railing, a little way ahead. He was chilling out, licking an ice cone, and purring happily to himself. He was a cool cat...or a frosty feline.

The cat's whiskers twitched as he heard the unicycle's engine. It seemed quite far away. He was far too cool to worry. But the roar was getting louder.

The cat glanced to one side, just to be sure - and had the shock of his life. He shrieked and fell off the railing. The unicycle shot past in a silver blur. The cat landed on the beach. The ice cone landed a second later. It was covered in bits of sand.

Ledd was on the promenade, some way ahead. He was polishing his own unicycle. There were lots of mirrors, badges and fancy lights. Ledd was kept very busy.

Ledd heard a noise. He looked up from his work. Kwif's unicycle raced along the railing. Tweeter was hanging on tight.

"I'll make you dizzy," snorted Ledd. He revved up his unicycle, and swerved off in pursuit.

Toggle was admiring the view from the promenade. She had walked along to the Starfish Marina, with its clean, white yachts and pleasure boats. Trundle trudged up to her, but he seemed a bit sad.

"Trundle! Bet you're loaded!" said Toggle.

"Unloaded," said Trundle. He spread his empty hands. He'd won nothing at all.

The skateboard rolled along the promenade, just behind the robots. It still had the yellow sunglasses, but Trundle didn't notice. "Now, where did I put my glasses?" he groaned. He'd even lost those.

"Never mind!" said Toggle. "Let's go for a ride."

"Nothing racy," said Trundle. "I'm still shook up."

Toggle pointed to a board with a huge poster. "Look at this!" she said. Trundle looked.

"The Lanky Legs Liner'," said Toggle, reading the words on the poster. "Fly high through the ocean waves. Guaranteed relaxing'."

The huge poster dwarfed Toggle and Trundle. It showed the Lanky Legs Liner out at sea. There was a white cabin like a big greenhouse, with an upper and lower deck. It had four slim, metal legs. They held it high and dry above the water.

The Lanky Legs Liner was not far away. It was standing in the Starfish Marina. The lanky legs had metal wheels, which ran on giant tracks. These led down the beach, and into the sea. The gang-plank was ready for the waiting queue.

The robots heard a voice. It was Captain Splicer, who was speaking on a loudspeaker. "Line up for the Lanky Legs Liner," he said. "All aboard!"

* * * * *

Kwif was still racing his unicycle on top of the railing. Tweeter was holding on tight. Ledd was speeding along the promenade. He went even faster, and rolled past Kwif.

Ledd jumped his unicycle up onto the railing. He glanced back at Kwif, who was behind him now. "Not so fast," said Ledd.

Ledd slowed his unicycle slightly. He was hoping to bash Kwif. The unicycles had rubber cushions round the sides, so they could bump each other around.

Kwif jumped his unicycle down again. "No. Faster!" sneered Kwif, as he raced ahead.

Tweeter clung on even harder. "That's fast enough!" she squealed.

Springer was still in the Games Arcade. Things were going well. He was playing another slot machine, called the Jellyfish Jolter. A glass jellyfish bobbed up and down, by a load of numbers. The higher it stopped, the more he would win.

Springer fiddled with his little control box, so the jellyfish bobbed up to the highest score. The machine made a bubbling sound. The jellyfish flashed on and off.

"Easy-peasy," said Springer. He took off his cap, and held it under the money chute. There was a flood of coins. The cap stretched like a sack. Springer caught them all.

A group of kids watched, amazed, as Springer moved to another game. "What a doddle!" said Springer. He shoved a coin in the slot.

The TV cameras were looking down from the ceiling. One of the cameras turned slowly. It was hoping to spot any trouble. The Arcade Boss glanced at a TV screen, as Springer came into view.

The camera zoomed into Springer's sack of money. "What...?" growled the Arcade Boss. This guy was winning loads and loads. That wasn't meant to happen!

The unicycles were speeding along. Both sides wanted to win. Ledd was on the railing, Kwif was on the ground. Ledd pulled back the handlebars, so his unicycle roared even louder. He raced along at incredible speed, and overtook Kwif below.

Ledd jumped his unicycle back on the ground. He twisted it round, and glared at Kwif.

Tweeter shut her eyes. "Whooah...!"

Kwif swerved his unicycle around Ledd. It was a very near miss. Kwif made a big cloud of dust, so Ledd's unicycle lost its shine. Kwif grinned at his own cleverness. "Nice move!" he said. He knew Tweeter would agree.

"Stop! You've made your point," said Tweeter.

"Feeling dizzy?" asked Kwif.

"I need a lie down," said Tweeter.

But Ledd wasn't giving up. He sped after Kwif's unicycle, and they were soon level again.

* * * * *

Captain Splicer was speaking as the tourists shuffled up the gang-plank. "All aboard the Lanky Legs Liner," he said. "Get your tickets here!"

Toggle and Trundle were already on board. They leaned against the railings. Trundle wasn't very bothered, but Toggle enjoyed watching the scene. Toggle loved the Lanky Legs Liner. She couldn't wait for the voyage to begin.

The Liner was painted a dazzling white. The decks were polished wood. The windows had twirling patterns in the glass, and the bells and door-knobs were brass. There were red and white rubber rings on the railings, with 'Lanky Legs Liner' written in black. They were very good rubber rings. They could even keep a robot afloat.

"Can't wait for the Crazy Coral Island," said Toggle. "Should be a great sea view!" They had a great view of the harbour, as everyone climbed aboard.

Trundle wasn't so happy, though. "I need a lie down," he said.

"Come on, Trundle!" said Toggle, thinking of the poster. "Guaranteed relaxing! Nothing but a nice slow ride."

* * * * *

The Liner was a lot slower than a unicycle. Kwif and Ledd were side by side as they streaked past a waiting Coast Cop. The dust settled in a moment. It left a grey coating on the Coast Cop's unicycle.

The Coast Cop scraped his finger over the unicycle. It made a trail in the dust. The Coast Cop liked his shiny blue paint. He didn't like it getting dusty.

The Coast Cop lowered his helmet with a smooth, electric clunk. He stared at the speeding riders. The unicycles were reflected in his dark plastic goggles. They were shrinking in the distance. The Coast Cop revved his engine, and flipped on his siren. He wasn't happy at all.

Springer came out of the Games Arcade. He glanced to the left and right. "Little pests!" hissed Springer. Some of the kids were following him.

Springer's cap had stretched to a huge sack. It was bulging with gold coins. Two or three spilt out, and the kids tried to grab them. "Hey! That's not yours!" snapped Springer. He grabbed the coins back.

But there was more trouble on its way. If Springer had stopped to listen, he would have heard the rumble of unicycle engines. They were becoming louder and louder.

Toggle could see the unicycles, although they were quite far away. She was following the chase through a telescope. It gave her a good, round view.

The unicycles raced along the promenade, with the Coast Cop close behind. The unicycles were kicking up a lot of dust, so it was hard to tell who was riding them. Then the money in the slot ran out. The telescope closed with a click.

Toggle looked at Trundle. He was sprawled on a deckchair. "Look at those tearaways," said Toggle. "Lock 'em up! Glad Tweeter sticks to the skateboard."

Kwif's unicycle was getting faster, and the wheel was spinning like mad. Tweeter was terrified, but Kwif wasn't giving up. He was edging ahead of Ledd, with the Coast Cop catching up.

The Coast Cop spoke into his radio. "Coast Cop Twelve! Coast Cop Twelve! Block the promenade at Rocky Pavilion. Rogue cycles in bad speed spin!"

Springer wrenched his sack of money away from the kids. "Scram, you rascals!" he snarled. His voice didn't sound very silver.

The kids ran off, and Springer nodded. That was the way to treat them! But what was that noise? It was getting nearer...

Springer looked round. He felt a little worried. Springer could see a puff of dust and two unicycles. Then he heard the sound of a Coast Cop siren.

Springer's face was dumbstruck. The Coast Cops! They were on to him already! Kwif and Ledd raced past, one each side. Springer tumbled backwards in a cloud of dust.

The Coast Cop spoke into his radio. "One casualty. I'll check it out..."

Springer sat up, and rubbed his head. He felt a little dazed. Springer stretched for the sack of money, but he suddenly gasped. The Coast Cop had stopped nearby.

"Hey, buddy," said the Coast Cop.

"Uh-oh," said Springer. "The cops!"

The Coast Cop stepped off his unicycle. He strolled over in his heavy boots. They went clunk, clunk, clunk on the ground. Springer grabbed the money and started to run.

"Hey, buddy? You okay?" asked the Coast Cop. But Springer didn't stop.

The Coast Cop watched Springer go. He shook his head. "Something funny..."

The Coast Cop spotted something on the ground. He bent down, and picked it up. It was Springer's tiny control box. The Coast Cop scowled. What was it? A secret device? That guy was up to no good...

The Coast Cop heard a voice. His head turned with a smoothly-oiled whirr. "Hey, Cop! Do something!" yelled the Arcade Boss. "That guy's robbed my arcade!"

* * * * *

The Lanky Legs Liner was about to leave. There was nobody on the gang-plank. But Springer rushed to the ticket window, and slapped down a coin. "One, please!"

Springer snatched the ticket, ran along the gang-plank and jumped aboard the Liner. The gates closed as the gang-plank lifted up. He'd only just made it in time.

The Lanky Legs Liner blasted its hooter. "We're off!" shrieked Toggle. She was jumping up and down. It was all so exciting.

There was a squeal of metal. A beach lizard gazed up with startled eyes. The squeal was followed by a grinding noise. The lizard scampered out of the way.

The wheels started rolling, and the Liner slid down the track. The track reached the gentle waves, where the wheels splashed through the water.

The whole of the promenade was blocked by Coast Cops. They each had a unicycle. The Coast Cops waited patiently, like an invading army. They listened to the roar of the chase.

Kwif was riding his unicycle in front of Ledd, although Ledd was catching up. Tweeter opened her eyes and saw the Coast Cops. "Uh-oh!" she said. "Looks like trouble."

Kwif looked up. He agreed with Tweeter. "I think you're right," said Kwif.

Ledd edged alongside Kwif. He glared across the gap between them, as the unicycles were very close together. "Call it quits?" asked Ledd. "I'm quicker than you?"

Kwif wasn't so sure. "Well..."

"He says yes!!!!" screamed Tweeter.

"Okay," said Kwif in a cool, calm voice.

Kwif stretched his arm. Ledd stretched his. The two slapped their hands together.

"Have fun with the Cops!" said Ledd. He swerved away, and sped down the promenade.

Kwif looked at the roadblock ahead. "That's a lot of Coast Cops," he said.

Tweeter had her eyes wide open. "I can see!" she yelled. "What now?"

The Lanky Legs Liner moved gracefully above the blue, rippling waves. Its legs sliced the sea with a swishing sound. They made curly wisps of foam in the water.

The decks were bustling with passengers, and a melody drifted from the music room. It was a wonderful luxury voyage.

Toggle looked over the railings. She was loving every minute. Toggle enjoyed sitting on the sandy beach, but it was great to see the wide open sea. She was delighted by the green sea-butterflies which swooped in the Liner's wake. They were full of the joys of life.

But not everyone cared about nature. Trundle was dozing in his deckchair. Toggle hoped she could liven him up. "Wake up, Trundle!" she said. "You're missing the voyage!"

There was a big steering wheel up on the bridge, just like any other ship. Captain Splicer nudged it to and fro, but it didn't do a lot. The Liner moved on its underwater tracks. It could only go where they led.

Captain Splicer was a very smart robot. He matched the colour of the Liner. He was white, with gold trimmings, and had a white cap on his head. There was a fancy pattern round the Captain's chin, which looked like a silver beard. He was speaking into a microphone, which dangled on a wire.

"...which is how the marvellous Lilac Ocean got its name," said the Captain. "It was named by Dr. Lily Von Lilac."

The Captain spotted something else worth seeing. He told everyone where to look. "And now, coming up on the left, we can see the magnificent Coral Peaks. Some call it Crazy Coral, but I'm far too sensible."

The Captain had a great view through his big window. He could see the distant peaks sticking out of the sea, a few miles away. They were sharp, stark and colourful. He said more into the microphone.

"These stupendous shapes were formed many thousands of years ago, and bought by the Beach Ball Corporation for the enjoyment of us all."

The Lanky Legs Liner curved round on its track. It moved towards the towering peaks. The Liner was soon dwarfed by the mountains of coral, which glowed pink, green and yellow in the sunlight. There were many other colours, too.

"We will be stopping here for an hour," said Captain Splicer. "You may purchase your own little chunks of coral, enjoy a coral-themed meal or hear the History of the Coral Peaks in the Coral Peaks Zone of Experience."

The coral loomed above the Liner in a vast, rainbow cliff. Toggle looked up in wonder. Some of the passengers were taking photos, so Toggle raised her camera. The Crazy Coral was like a mountain of flowers, carved from magical stone. "Wow," said Toggle, as she took a few shots.

But something blocked the view. Toggle lowered her camera. She was astonished by what she could see. "I don't believe it," she sighed. "Vick Void!" Toggle forgot about the Crazy Coral. Vick was much more magnificent.

Springer was still wearing his magnetic moustache. He turned and looked at Toggle. "Why - yes!" said Springer. "How did you know? Always glad to meet a fan!"

"Saw your photo, Mr. Void!" said Toggle. "Er...you don't sound like Mr. Void..."

"I'm resting my voicebox," said Springer.

Toggle nodded. "Ah..."

Springer tried a smoother accent. "But I can be a little more silver if you like!"

Toggle gasped. It must be! The one and only Silver Voicebox. "Oh, Vick!" she said. "I'll enter your talent show!"

"You will...?" said Springer.

Toggle nodded. "Top prizes," she smiled. "Sounds good to me!"

It sounded good to Springer, too.

"Cha! Cha! Cha!" said Toggle. She danced a little. "But Trundle's not very bothered."

"No...?" said Springer.

Toggle nodded at Trundle. "He's missing the Crazy Coral," she said. Trundle was still dozing on his deck-chair.

Springer glanced at Trundle, and cracked a cunning smile. "It would be a crime to miss the Crazy Coral," he said. "Let me show you the crazy delights..."

Springer offered Toggle his hand. The breeze rippled his magnetic moustache in a most inviting way. He looked so handsome! So dashing! He was the robot of Toggle's dreams. She dithered a moment. She was rather shy...and what about Trundle?

But this was a very special moment. Toggle would never meet Vick Void again. She forgot about Trundle, and took Springer's hand. They strolled away together.

Trundle was still dozing on his deck-chair. He was missing the Crazy Coral. Trundle's brain whirred with trouble and toil. He tossed and turned in his sleep.

The Lanky Legs Liner weaved between the Coral Peaks. There was never any danger of hitting them, as it followed the underwater tracks.

Captain Splicer knew everything about the Coral Peaks. He told the passengers more. "As you can see, there are twelve types of coral," said Captain Splicer. "But that's just for starters! The Coral Peaks are the most amazing ge-O-logical phen-O-menon. Sorry about the big O's! One special point to point out is the incredible Frisky Fountain, which..."

A buzzing sound cut into the Captain's speech. "Just a moment! Just a moment!" said Captain Splicer. He picked up the radio-phone. "Hullo. Captain Splicer..."

"Listen, Captain," said an urgent voice. "This is Coast Cop Command. You have a wanted criminal on board the Liner. A robot. Look out for a springy moustache."

"Okay," said Captain Splicer. He pressed a button, and spoke into the microphone. "Attention all crew. Emergency! We have a springy moustache on board."

Springer and Toggle leaned against the railings. They stared at the beautiful view. The green sea butterflies fluttered past. They were heading for the Crazy Coral. Springer had his arm around Toggle. She pinged his springy moustache.

Trundle was tossing and turning on his deck-chair. He needed the vacation, but his sleep was scary. Trundle was no longer on the planet Beach Ball. He could hear a voice, echoing in a dream...

The old robot shook his head. "I'm a HydroClutch, Trundle. We built this place. But we're big and heavy. We're on wheels."

"Help me, Reckner!" said Trundle. "Push it out the way..."

But Reckner knew it was useless. They were nearly out of time, and it was a long way back to the manhole. "Trundle. I'm an engineer," he said. "I know what's possible...and impossible."

Trundle was drifting in the past.

The sailors ran all over the Lanky Legs Liner. They were looking at all the passengers. First, they tried the top deck. It had a paddling pool and benches.

One sailor grabbed a man with a long, springy moustache. "Hey, that's him," he said. "What a 'stache!"

"But he's a human, dumb!" said another. "We want a robot!" The sailors ran down the steps.

Toggle and Springer were gazing out to sea. Toggle was resting her head on Springer's shoulder, with her eyes closed in a happy daze. A melody drifted from the music room. She felt very, very peaceful. Toggle wished she could stay here forever - just her and Vick - and forget all about the Metal Moon.

But Springer didn't care about Toggle. He was a tip-top crook, who knew the sound of trouble. There were moans and groans from the music room. What was going on? Springer glanced over his shoulder.

The music started playing loudly, as the band tried to hide the noise. But the yelling and shouting grew louder, so it drowned out the band. "Where is he?" cried a sailor. "There's no moustache..."

"No moustache 'ere!" yelled another.

"Drat!" said Springer. It was time to go. Springer took off his magnetic moustache, and ran as quick as he could.

Toggle's head was starting to sag, but her eyes were closed in delight. To think she was here...with the Silver Voicebox! It must be a dream come true.

Trundle was tossing and turning on his deck-chair. His dream was more of a nightmare. He could hear voices, which echoed in his head. They'd echoed in the dark tunnels.

"Reckner," gasped Trundle. "Come on..."

Reckner sighed. "I'm retired, Trundle. End of the line. Take this, get out of here..."
Reckner stretched his arm. But he didn't pull himself up. He was holding the wangle-spanner.

Trundle shook his head slowly. They gripped the spanner together. The tunnel shook with another collapse, some way back in the distance.

But that wasn't the only noise Trundle could hear. There was someone calling from far, far away. Maybe...a rescue team! What was it saying? Trundle listened hard...

"Hey...wake up, you!" said the voice. "Wake up!"

Trundle's eyes opened as he was shaken hard. He blinked at the bright blue sky. There was a sailor each side of the deck-chair, with Captain Splicer in the middle. The heads loomed over him.

"He's the criminal, sir," said one of the sailors.

"No doubt about it," said the other sailor.

The Captain leant forward. "That's a very springy moustache!" He twanged the end of the curly object, which was stuck under Trundle's nose.

Springer ran to the back of the Lanky Legs Liner, and ripped a plant from a pot. He pulled out his sack of money, then shoved the plant back again. Springer dashed to the railings, grabbed two rubber rings and looped them over his arms.

Springer climbed over the side of the Liner. He stood on a narrow ledge. Springer held the railing in one hand, the sack in the other. He swayed to and fro in the breeze.

Toggle was leaning on the railings, near the front of the Lanky Legs Liner. She sighed gently, and gazed at the waves.

Toggle stretched a loving hand for Springer. "Don't play games, darling," she whispered. Toggle wriggled her fingers. She found nothing but fresh, salty air.

Toggle opened her eyes. Her dream had gone. "Vick?" sighed Toggle. She felt startled and sad.

Springer looked down at the rippling sea, far below the Lanky Legs Liner. A green sea-butterfly fluttered past. Springer didn't want to jump, but there was no other way. He stretched his arms and jumped.

Trundle slid back on the deck-chair. He wanted peace and quiet, but the sailors wanted him. They thought he was a crook, so they grabbed him.

"Right! Come on, flotsam-face," said one.

"Jetsam-jaws!" said the other.

Toggle heard the noise. She snapped out of her daze, and went to help Trundle. "Excuse me!" said Toggle. She nudged the sailors away.

"Who's me?" asked a sailor.

Toggle ripped the moustache off Trundle's face. "Look, dumb!" she said. "It's magnetic!"

The sailors were speechless. So was Captain Splicer. He rubbed his silver beard.

The Coral Peaks loomed against the bright blue sky. They dwarfed the Lanky Legs Liner. But the rippling sea wasn't empty. Springer paddled along in a rubber ring. It could even keep a robot afloat.

Springer sniggered in a sly manner. He had a very good reason, too. He was tugging the other rubber ring. It was holding his sack of money.

* * * * *

The sky was filled with an orange glow as another day came to a close. The clouds were purple above the city lights, and the stars appeared one by one.

Tweeter was sitting in the dingy seafront arch, which Kwif had made his home. The place was filled with boxes, unicycle spares and beachcombed bits and bobs. Kwif's unicycle was parked in the corner. It was a little dusty, but undamaged. The unicycle had earned a good polish. Kwif would see to it later.

Kwif had an oil-shake. So did Tweeter. They sipped them together, and laughed. "That was great, Kwif!" smiled Tweeter. "How you got past the roadblock..."

"Yeah!" said Kwif. "Ledd's got a quicker unicycle...but mine jumps a lot higher!"

Tweeter remembered what had happened. The Coast Cops were blocking the promenade, but Kwif raced towards them. Tweeter had been terrified.

But Kwif's unicycle had a few tricks. The wheel shot out on its springy spike, which made it jump in the air. They swooped right over the Coast Cops.

Kwif scratched his head. He was amazed by his own cleverness. "Had to get home somehow," said Kwif.

"Yeah," nodded Tweeter. She slurped the last of her oil-shake, and put down the can. "Thanks for the shake, Kwif," said Tweeter. "But I'd better get back. Our vacation's nearly over."

"That's a shame," said Kwif.

"We've got a home to go to," said Tweeter. "Back to the Metal Moon."

Kwif glanced around his archway. He'd never been anywhere but the planet Beach Ball. "What's it like?" he asked.

Tweeter tried to picture the Metal Moon. It seemed like ages ago. "Not much of a seaside," she said. "Just a sludge canal! A zillion factories, noise, smoke. Dad made rockets, but the factory blew up. I guess they'll build another."

"I guess they will," said Kwif.

"But we have fun," smiled Tweeter. "My friend Cog...he's a genius! Getting in trouble, that is. I kind of miss it."

Kwif finished his oil-shake. He chucked the can in the bin. "I'll stick to the beach!" said Kwif. "The lazy life. Show off the unicycle."

"What about Ledd?" asked Tweeter.

"Oh - he's okay," said Kwif. "We race every week! I win one week, he wins the next."

"Sure," said Tweeter. "Oh - have you see a skateboard with glasses?"

* * * * *

The hotel windows were lighting up. Each had a tale to tell. Some had aliens watching Space TV, and others had robots arguing. But something else was going on, down below the building.

All was dark and silent in the hotel basement. Then a torch came on with a click. It shone a yellow circle on the basement wall. Then it started to move around.

There were dusty boxes and old wooden trunks, piled in every corner. They had labels from different space-lines, and badges from other worlds. Many were faded and peeling.

The yellow circle fell on a big pile of parcels. They were tied up in stripy space-mail ribbon, with bright sticky labels. There was a very big parcel, several medium-sized parcels and quite a few small ones.

The torchlight glimmered on a lean, metal face. It was Springer, the master criminal. "Mmm. Top Prizes for the Top Talent," said Springer. There was a greedy gleam in his eye.

Springer shone the torch on a medium-sized parcel. It was about the size of a washing machine. He peered at the label, and read it aloud. "ERIC, the Ever Roving Interior Cleaner. A servant with a smile. This side up."

Springer snorted. It was a useless prize. Why would a robot need a robot? Springer moved to another parcel, and read the label. "Laser Barbecue. A flash in the pan." It didn't look any better.

Springer picked up a small parcel. "What's this?" he wondered. He read the label. "Zodiac Alarm Clock. You can Snooze, Choose or Lose! Pah!"

Springer threw the parcel away. "No more silly nic-nacs!" he scowled. Springer crept over to the biggest parcel. He shone his torch on the label.

There was a small picture of a shining sun, with a wheel spinning round it. "Now, this looks promising," said Springer. "What is it?" He read the label carefully. "Brand new model, best ever...the fantastic, the amazing..."

Springer's voice tailed off, and he gasped in delight. No more rubbish, but a real prize! "I must have it! I must!" said Springer. He clapped his hands. "And I will!"

* * * * *

Toggle was slumped on the sofa, looking very sad. Trundle was by her side. Toggle shook her head slowly. "It wasn't Vick Void," she said. "I can't believe it. How could he lie to me like that?"

"And give me that daft moustache," said Trundle. "Nearly got into trouble."

Rota the GyroFish was sitting on the mantelpiece. He was wearing the magnetic moustache. Rota bleeped.

"It's put me right off the talent show," said Toggle. "It looked like a lot of fun."

Trundle put an arm on Toggle's shoulder. "Oh, come on love," he said. "Top prizes!"

"You should enter, Trundle," said Toggle.

"No way!" said Trundle. "I couldn't win a tin of tin-tacks. You have a go with Tweeter."

Toggle glanced at the window. "Where is she?" sighed Toggle. "It's getting late..."

But Tweeter wasn't far away. Kwif chugged to a halt on his unicycle, just by the hotel. The crowds had gone, so the promenade was quiet.

Tweeter took off her helmet, and jumped off the unicycle. "Thanks for the lift, Kwif," she smiled.

"No problem," said Kwif.

What a beautiful evening, thought Tweeter. It was always beautiful on the planet Beach Ball. The sky was a darker blue at night, with a glow from the smaller sun. The stars were scattered like raindrops, so their reflections danced in the sea. The planet's ring made a curve in the sky. It shone a dusty white.

What a wonderful moment, thought Kwif. He didn't have much of anything...just a unicycle and a dingy archway. Kwif loved to listen to Springer, with his tales of travel and trouble. But Springer didn't know a robot like Tweeter. Kwif was very lucky.

"Tweeter...?" said Kwif.

"Yes?" said Tweeter.

Kwif kissed Tweeter with a light, metallic tap. She quivered a little bashfully.

"Stay with me," said Kwif. "On the planet Beach Ball."

"Guaranteed relaxing!" smiled Tweeter.

Kwif put his hand on Tweeter's shoulder. "I'm not joking," he said. "I'll buy you a unicycle."

Tweeter gazed at Kwif for a moment. He was very, very shiny. She liked him, too. But what about Mom, Dad, her friends back home? She couldn't stay here forever.

"Bye!" said Tweeter. She pulled away, and scampered up the hotel steps. Kwif didn't say anything. He just watched her go.

Tweeter stopped for a second. She waved at Kwif. Then she vanished through the grand entrance.

All was silent on the promenade. Kwif had the place to himself. It was better at night, when the crowds had gone. No more hustle and bustle. Kwif could hear the hiss of the sea, as it gently lapped the shore.

Kwif gazed after Tweeter. Maybe he'd see her again. But Kwif saw his own reflection in the unicycle mirror. He started to admire it.

"I look pretty good," said Kwif. Tweeter thought so, too. He was the best. The very best. Ledd would be really jealous.

Kwif stroked the sleek, metal quiff on top of his head. But he was startled by a sudden voice. "Pssst!"

Kwif's head snapped round. He couldn't see anyone. "Who is it?" asked Kwif.

"Down on the beach," said the voice. It didn't sound very silver, but it sounded pretty smooth.

"Ohhh," groaned Kwif. "Springer." He wanted to relax and think things over, not worry about secret plans. But a promise was a promise. Kwif didn't have any choice.

Kwif chugged his unicycle across the promenade, down a ramp and onto the sand. The beach was cool, dark and empty. He could hear the lapping of the water, which was closer now. There was the scuffle of a beach lizard.

Kwif flipped on the unicycle's headlamp. It hit Springer with a circle of light. Springer dashed out of the way.

"What's your problem?" asked Kwif.

"Shhh. Don't shout," hissed Springer.

Kwif sighed. This was getting silly.

Springer crept over to Kwif. He spoke in a very sneaky voice. "I'm not Vick Void anymore," said Springer.

Kwif sniggered. "I know! Where's your springy moustache?"

"It's not funny!" said Springer. "I can't stay on this planet. Cops are on my trail."

"So?" asked Kwif.

"I need your help," said Springer. "One last time. You're a very talented chap."

"Yep," smiled Kwif.

"Thanks, Kwif!" said Springer.

"I am very talented," said Kwif.

Springer was annoyed. This was no time for jokes. "Kwif!" he snapped. "There's some great prizes. Fancy a Breezy Ice Cube Freezer? Or an Auto Bubble-Popper? Even...a Zodiac Alarm Clock?"

"Not really," said Kwif.

"How about some money?" asked Springer.

"That's good," said Kwif.

If Kwif wanted money, then money it would be. But it wouldn't be very much. Kwif sat and listened, while Springer told him the plan.

"I've stashed a load of cash, ready to grab," said Springer. "But I want to grab the prizes too. Then I'll zip off in the getaway ship. Nothing can go wrong!"

The next day was bright and sunny. It was always sunny on the planet Beach Ball, just like the brochure said. Trundle strolled along the promenade. He stopped by the Games Arcade.

"Mmm. Might do better," said Trundle. "Let's have another go." He held up a shiny gold coin.

Kwif's unicycle was parked by a photo booth. It wasn't far from the Games Arcade. There were some flashes behind the curtain.

Kwif was sitting inside the photo booth. He was wearing another magnetic moustache. Kwif posed for the camera, and it snapped away.

Kwif took off his magnetic moustache. He didn't want to be seen wearing it. He stepped out of the photo booth, and waited for a few seconds. A set of photos dropped into the tray. Kwif snatched them up.

Kwif shuffled through the photos. "Hmmm," he nodded. He was very pleased. Kwif jumped on his unicycle. He drove off in a cloud of dust.

Trundle was back in the Games Arcade. He strolled over to a big machine, which looked very tricky to him. It had buttons to press, springs and bells. Trundle was about to shove his coin in the slot, but a loud voice stopped him.

"Stop! Don't waste your cash on the Penny-Jog Pinball!" it said. "Don't lose your money on the Whirligig Bingo! Dare you slot your coin in the King of Slot Machines, the grrr-eat Atomic Spinner?"

Trundle looked towards the sound of the voice. He spotted a huge machine, like a flying saucer covered with glitter. There was a big glass bubble in the middle, which sparkled with atomic energy, and lots of dials round the edge. There was a model of an atom on top. The machine looked very exciting.

Trundle glanced at his coin. Then he thought of something. The mysterious purple tent on the promenade. What was the lady's name? Lyza Lite...a teller of fortunes and giver of good advice.

Trundle could remember the scene very clearly. Lyza had an elf-like face and purple hair. "I see stars spinning in the void of space," she whispered. "I see...a drip, a trickle...a shower of gold!"

She was stroking a large crystal ball, which sparkled with yellow and silver stars. The sparkling stars turned into spinning coins.

Trundle looked up from his coin to the Atomic Spinner. A flashing arrow was pointing to the coin slot. Trundle scratched his head, and made up his mind. "Oeer...let's get lucky," he said.

Trundle stepped over to the Atomic Spinner. He took a firm grip of the lever. Then he shoved his money in.

The Atomic Spinner came alive. Lights flashed, there was a hum of power, and the model atom started to spin.

An alien kid was playing a much easier game. It was the Whirligig Bingo. He watched the numbers go up and down, but he didn't win anything. The alien kid scratched his blue, fluffy head. He was out of money now.

But what was that noise? That powerful hum? The alien kid looked up. He spotted Trundle on the Atomic Spinner.

No chance, thought the alien kid. He picked up his plastic beach toys - a bucket and spade - and walked over to the Atomic Spinner.

"No chance," said the alien kid.

Trundle didn't take any notice.

Dials began to whirl in front of Trundle. They stopped and started, and showed different pictures. Trundle had seen it all before. "Just like the rocket factory," he murmured.

Trundle pulled the lever. The dials stopped one by one. They showed three different pictures in a winning combination. There was a star, a snowflake and another star.

The Atomic Spinner lit up. There was a trickle of gold. Three coins popped out of a chute, and landed in the prize tray.

"Congratulations!" said the Atomic Spinner.

"Wow!" said the alien kid.

There were some big-time players in the Games Arcade. Some of them glanced at Trundle. The Atomic Spinner was very, very tricky. Trundle was doing well.

Springer was keeping low after his narrow escape. It had been far too close for comfort. He had to keep a jump ahead of the Coast Cops. Even two or three jumps. Springer found a quiet phone box in a shady street, where he made a shady call.

"Hello, Zipp? I need a getaway ship," said Springer. "No, a spaceship, not a canoe."

Zipp wasn't up to the job, but he didn't ask awkward questions. Springer didn't listen to Zipp. He just told him what to do.

"Nothing fancy," said Springer. "The plainer, the better. But make it roomy. I'll have prizes galore!" Springer put down the phone.

Trundle was still playing the Atomic Spinner. He was having plenty of luck. One of the TV cameras could see him, from high up on the ceiling.

Lights flashed, dials whirled and Trundle's winnings grew bigger. The alien kid heard a jingle, and held his bucket under the chute. Coins poured into the bucket. A shower of gold!

The Arcade Boss was sitting in the control room. He was watching the TV screens. One of the screens showed Trundle. The Arcade Boss wasn't happy.

"Another cheat," fumed the Arcade Boss. He turned a knob, so the picture zoomed into Trundle. He was winning far too much.

The Arcade Boss pressed a button. The picture froze. A black and white photo whirred from a slot. It showed Trundle with all his money.

A crowd had gathered around Trundle. They clapped at his skill. Trundle bowed, a little stiffly. He felt a bit shy.

"Ace!" said the alien kid.

But another voice spoke. The crowd fell silent. They all looked at the big machine, with its glow of atomic energy.

"Very good, Trundle," said the Atomic Spinner. "You spin the atoms well. But are you ready for the greatest challenge? Will you try for the Crazy Diamond?"

A glittering image appeared in the glass bubble. It was a fantastic, chunky diamond. "Go on! You've got to win it!" said the alien kid.

Everyone held their breath.

Trundle thought hard. The diamond looked very tempting. He'd been lucky so far, but luck could run out. They wouldn't clap a loser. If he won the Crazy Diamond, he'd be a big-time player. There was nothing crazy about that.

"Go on," said the alien kid.

Trundle made up his mind. "I'll try."

Everyone breathed again.

The dials started to whirl. Trundle watched them closely. They went round and round, faster and faster. The alien kid whirled his eyes, trying to keep up. But the dials just made him dizzy.

Time slowed down as Trundle reached for the lever. The sound in the Games Arcade faded to silence, and he remembered another place with levers and dials...

Trundle was standing with Reckner at a control bank, back in the rocket factory. The dials whirled in chaos like those on a fruit machine. Reckner watched them, wisely.

"I'll show you how, Trundle. Take the lever," said Reckner.

Trundle did so. Reckner watched the dials.

"Wait for it...", said Reckner. "Wait...wait. NOW!"

Trundle pulled the lever. The dials stopped spinning, one after the other. Each had a picture of the Crazy Diamond. The lights on the Atomic Spinner flashed wildly, and the Crazy Diamond bounced into the prize tray.

The alien kid jumped in glee. "You got lucky!" The crowd cheered as Trundle picked up the diamond. It glittered in the light.

"I'd better look after this," said Trundle. It was a big diamond. It was very valuable. He'd put it somewhere safe.

The Arcade Boss knew about the Crazy Diamond. It was very, very valuable, which was why no-one was meant to win it. He made a quick, angry phone call. "Hullo, Cops? We've got another cheat..."

Trundle walked out of the Games Arcade. The alien kid followed him. The coins were almost spilling from the bucket.

"Help yourself, sonny," said Trundle. "I'll have to keep the bucket."

"Thanks, mister!" said the alien kid. He scooped up some coins with his plastic spade, and scampered off in a hurry. Trundle started plodding along the promenade. It was quite a heavy load.

* * * * *

Toggle and Tweeter were back on the Beach Ball beach, trying to juggle beach balls. Rota couldn't help them, but he was having fun. He flew around, bleeping wildly. The robots dropped all the beach balls.

"Great act, Mom," said Tweeter. But she wasn't telling the truth. It was just a bouncing muddle.

"Mmmm," sighed Toggle. "It needs a little work."

"A little...?" frowned Tweeter.

"We've got half an hour," said Toggle.

Tweeter shook her head. "No chance."

Toggle looked at the beach balls. They lay on the sand like giant sweets. Tweeter was right, but what could they do? Toggle's voice became softer. She needed Tweeter's help.

"Look, Tweeter," said Toggle. "Vick Void's the judge, remember...and this time, the real Vick Void." Toggle imagined a picture of the radio star. He was floating in a glowing pink heart.

Vick was a shiny robot with a sleek silver head. He was neat, clean and tidy. Vick had a twist of metal like a bright bow-tie, and a flashy metal jacket. The real Vick was totally different, but Toggle dreamt of him this way.

"Your hero," sighed Tweeter.

Toggle sighed, too. "We all loved him at the factory." She remembered the hard nights of scrubbing and polishing, when The Vick Void Show had been the only relief. They'd mopped along to the music, and made patterns in the grime. Gaffer had seen their wonderful act, but he'd switched off the radio. Gaffer only cared about work.

But the robots had been good at dancing. Maybe it was time for an audience. "Hey! I've got an idea," said Toggle. She clicked her silver fingers. The heart-throb image popped like a bubble. She would soon see the real thing!

Springer had lost his magnetic moustache, but he was still Vick Void in the photos. His picture was stuck on the poster, just by the Cabaret Lounge.

Mr. Glitz was another robot, and he looked like a showbiz star. Mr. Glitz had glittery purple paintwork with gold, polished dials. There were sequins on his big metal collar. Mr. Glitz glared at the photo. He wasn't too pleased.

"What's he doing here?" growled Mr. Glitz. "I'm the talent show talent!" Mr. Glitz ripped off the photo. There was another underneath. It was a photo of Mr. Glitz.

There was a Coast Cop unicycle by the Games Arcade. A Coast Cop was on the case. He jotted notes on a silver pad, as the Arcade Boss told the story.

"That's what I reckon," said the Arcade Boss. "It's an organised gang, I reckon. I reckon they want to clean me out!"

"...major financial scam'," wrote the Coast Cop. He snapped his silver pad shut. "Okay, mister," said the Coast Cop. "It's one for the Crime Squad. I'll get on the radio..."

Mr. Glitz was in the Cabaret Lounge. He was standing on the stage by a big microphone. His voice echoed around the hall. "One, two, three, testing!" said Mr. Glitz. "One, one, one...two, three. Any more? Four...?"

There was no answer. The place was empty.

"No?" said Mr. Glitz. "Just testing..."

Toggle and Tweeter were in the hotel room. They stood in front of a mirror, and fixed magnetic ribbons on their heads. They both looked very pretty.

The door opened. Trundle staggered in. He had the heavy bucket of coins.

"What's all that?" asked Tweeter.

"I got lucky," said Trundle. He dropped the bucket on the floor, and slumped into an armchair.

"Hard work?" asked Toggle.

"Just like the factory," said Trundle. "Think I'll doze for a bit."

Tweeter smiled. "That's just like the factory," she said. Trundle always fell into his chair after work.

"Don't miss the show," said Toggle.

"I wonn...zzzzzz," said Trundle. His voice trailed into an electronic snore.

"He's guarding his money!" said Tweeter.

"Rota can do that," said Toggle.

Rota woke up with a beep. He flew down to the bucket, and gripped the handle with his grippers. Rota struggled to lift it, but the weight was too much. It was still full of coins.

"It's a bit heavy, Rota!" smiled Tweeter.

Toggle and Tweeter laughed. Rota joined in with a merry bleeping.

The Metal Moon robots were having fun, but Springer and Kwif had plans. They were lurking behind the fortune teller's tent.

"All set, Kwif?" asked Springer.

"Everything's ready," said Kwif. He whipped out a picture, which he'd taken in the photo booth.

Springer peered at the picture. "Nice photo," he said. It showed Kwif wearing a magnetic moustache.

"Glad you like it," said Kwif.

Springer offered Kwif his expensive, shiny pen. "Sign it," he said in a cunning voice.

Kwif took the pen and squiggled a signature. It was very simple. Just a star and spiral.

"There! I'm the new Vick Void!" said Kwif.

"And I'm Springer the Master Criminal!" said Springer.

They slapped their hands together. They were a real team!

* * * * *

The band was playing a bouncy tune. The Cabaret Lounge was packed solid. The audience cheered as the lights went down, and Mr. Glitz strolled on stage. The spotlight followed him to the middle, where he stopped by the microphone.

"Thank you, thank you," said Mr. Glitz. "You're lucky to be here today, we've got lots of fun. Fun and sun, that's the Beach Ball motto. It's always sunny on Beach Ball! But has anyone been to Drizzle Dome City? No? It's always raining there!"

It was time for a few classic jokes, just to get the show rolling. Mr. Glitz gave them one of his best, hoping for a big laugh. "This robot's out walking," said Mr. Glitz. "'Oh no!' he says. 'It's raining! I don't want to get rusty!'"

"You're rusty," shouted someone in the audience. There were a few giggles.

"So he goes into a shop," said Mr. Glitz. "Great big shop, sells anything. Robot gets nice and dry. Anyway, this bloke comes over. 'Can I help?' he says. 'No,' says the robot. 'I don't want an umbrella.' Bloke's a bit puzzled. 'Why?' he says. 'Cos I'm indoors,' says the robot."

The audience groaned.

Springer stood by the hotel's grand entrance. He dashed up the steps, and crept through the lobby. He stopped by the photo of Mr. Glitz, who was grinning on the poster. He wouldn't be grinning for long.

Springer stuck another photo on top of Mr. Glitz. It was the picture of Kwif with the magnetic moustache. Kwif had signed it with the Vick Void squiggle.

Mr. Glitz was still on stage in the Cabaret Lounge. He was finishing his terrible jokes. "Anyway, enough of my nonsense," said Mr. Glitz. "It's time for us to judge your talent for the top, top prizes. We've twenty acts this afternoon, from Zed the Incredible Activist to Ali the Tame TV. So first of all, let me welcome - "

Suddenly, a trap-door opened and Mr. Glitz dropped out of sight. The audience roared with laughter. The trap-door shot back up carrying Kwif, who was painted a sparkling silver-blue. Kwif was wearing the magnetic moustache. He really looked like a showbiz star.

"Hey - who's that loser?" said Kwif. "Welcome to the Vick Void Talent Show!"

The drums rolled, and the audience cheered.

Meanwhile, Springer was lurking in the hotel lobby. He lounged on a sofa, but he couldn't stop fidgeting. Springer glanced at his watch.

A shadow fell on the bright, white wall. It had a low hat and long mac, just like a detective. Springer glanced up. It was a creature with eyes on stalks. The eyes were staring at Springer.

"Name's Stroller," said the creature. "Crime Squad." He was a bit like a crab, but he walked like a human. He could see a lot with his eye-stalks, which was why he made a good detective. It was either that or crawling in the sea. Stroller was bored with marine life.

"You seen this robot?" asked Stroller. He waved a photo under Springer's nose.

Springer didn't sound too sure. "Hmmm..."

"He's wanted for cheating," said Stroller. "Got thousands from the slot machines. You see him, you call me at once."

Springer peered at the photo. It was in black and white, with TV lines and a TV-shaped border.

There was a robot in the picture. Springer had seen him before. He'd been dozing on the Lanky Legs Liner, but he wasn't dozing now. He was playing the Atomic Spinner, and winning too much. Coins were pouring into a bucket.

Springer wanted those coins, but he didn't want Stroller to know that. "Y...yyyes," said Springer. He was trying to sound scared. "He looks a very dodgy character."

"Sure is," said Stroller. "We think he's hiding in the hotel, somewhere..."

"He is?" gasped Springer. "Maybe he's...watching the talent show."

"The what...?" asked Stroller.

Springer pointed at the Cabaret Lounge. "Right in there," he said. "But do find him. I'd hate to be robbed."

Stroller patted Springer on the shoulder. Poor guy, thought Stroller. He was very scared. He'd come for a quiet vacation, not all this worry.

"That's okay, sir," said Stroller. "We're on the job." He glanced at the sign with the Vick Void photo, and strolled into the Cabaret Lounge.

Springer waited for a few seconds. Then he jumped off the sofa with a sly cackle. "Time to see a friend!" he said.

* * * * *

There was a terrible act in the Cabaret Lounge. It was Miss Honeypop and the Bitter Beast. She was a pretty girl in a honey-coloured dress, with a giant puppet snake on one arm. She tried to make the puppet talk, but its mouth hardly opened and hers did...too much.

"Oh, yes, Miss Honeypop. I'm the Bitter Beast," she said. Miss Honeypop twitched the snake around. "Look at all those sugary smiles! What a sweet audience we have!" But the audience didn't sound very sweet. They started to boo, loudly.

Stroller was lurking in the back row. His eyes swivelled this way, then that, on their bendy stalks. He was searching for the criminal. Stroller didn't pay any attention to the talent show, but he stood in everyone's way. The act was so terrible, nobody cared.

There was a big space behind the stage, where all the scenery was kept. It had ropes and levers which worked the curtains and lights. There was also a big pile of prizes.

Kwif popped round to have a look, while the show went on without him. The prizes gleamed in their shiny wrappings. Kwif tugged a ribbon. They were very tempting. But he could hear the muffled sounds of the audience, and the band striking up.

Kwif glanced back towards the noise of the show. "Better keep the audience happy," he said. Kwif dived through the curtains, and raced onstage.

Miss Honeypop was talking to the snake, but her voice was drowned by the booing. Kwif pushed her aside.

"Thank you, Miss Honeypop," said Kwif. "Guess I don't have a sweet tooth! Moving right along..."

Tweeter peered out from the side of the stage. She watched a bit of the show. The magnetic ribbon sat on her head like a pretty pink butterfly.

"The one and only Vick," said Tweeter. "So Mom was right, after all." She stared at the showbiz robot. He had a big moustache, and sparkling silver-blue paintwork.

Tweeter was very curious. There was something funny about Vick. Tweeter shook her head. "I'm sure I've seen him before..."

But Toggle wasn't worried about anything. Her head popped out behind Tweeter's, and her eyes were filled with delight.

"It's wonderful!" smiled Toggle. It was the moment she'd dreamt of. "Vick Void...at last!"

The hotel had lots of corridors, with lots of doors. They led to many rooms. The robot maid pushed a big trolley along the smooth, blue carpet. There was a silver lid on top, which was shaped like a dome. It hid something special underneath.

Suddenly, the maid heard a rustling noise. She stopped in her tracks. What was it? Something hiding in the potted palm? Maybe a beach lizard. The maid wasn't very keen on beach lizards. They always changed colour, so you couldn't see them.

But it wasn't a beach lizard. Springer leapt out from the green, jagged leaves. The maid screamed in fright, and jumped back. The frilly cap wobbled on her head.

"Sorry to scare you, miss," said Springer. "I'm looking for a friend of mine."

The maid fixed her cap. She was calm again. "A...f-friend, sir?" asked the maid.

"Yes," said Springer. "A clunky old robot. He's rusty and brown..."

Trundle was in his hotel room, dozing in the armchair. He had some peace and quiet, at last. Rota was perched on the plastic bucket. He was gripping the plastic handle. Rota liked guarding all the money.

The TV was on, although Trundle was missing it. Rota watched the screen with his big, round eyes.

"...earlier today," said the TV news, "and he spoke live from the Metal Moon. Cyton Zero said plans for his new rocket factory are ready to go, and will include a statue of RumbleChip one-zero-two, a brave worker destroyed in the accident."

Stoke's picture flashed up on the screen, although Trundle didn't see it. He also missed the next bit.

"The trouble was blamed on Reckner," said the TV news, "an old HydroClutch robot. One lucky worker was saved by the Crisis Crew and their latest amazing gadgetry."

Rota blinked at the TV screen. It wasn't telling the truth, but he couldn't tell Trundle. Rota could only bleep.

"That's about it from Trans-Nebula News, the void's most trusty News-Bite. Your full cosmic weather service follows, then it's cartoon fun with Sniffy and Snooze..."

There was a knock on the door. Trundle stirred in his sleep. There was more knocking and a voice. "Room service!"

Trundle woke up and blinked his eyes. He felt rather bleary and unsure. Trundle sat up with a creak of metal. "Who...?" he groaned. "I'm asleep. I was...uh...I didn't order anything."

The maid was standing outside the door, along with her room service trolley. Springer was standing behind the maid. He had a gun pointed at her head.

The maid didn't know what to say. She looked at Springer, who was rubbing his chin. He had to think of something fast. "Tell him...it's a gift from the games arcade," said Springer. "Something nice for the winner."

The maid leant closer to the door. Her voice was very nervous. "Uh...it's something nice...!cos you won!"

There was some bouncy music as the cartoon started. Trundle bounced off the armchair. He was pleased with himself. "Why didn't you say so?" said Trundle. "Come in!"

The door slid open. There was the maid, but she was shaking in fear. Springer shoved her out of the way. He pushed the trolley into the room, and stuck his gun in Trundle's face.

Trundle gulped.

"We meet again," said Springer.

"We've never met," said Trundle.

"Oh, don't be so grumpy," said Springer. "Top, top prizes for the winners. I take the money, you take the cakes!"

Springer lifted the silver lid. There was a silver plate underneath. It was crammed with delicious cakes.

"No good for a robot," said Trundle.

"Very expensive," said Springer. The cakes were coated in glistening sugar. They oozed with jam and cream.

* * * * *

Kwif was on stage in his Vick Void disguise. He was keeping the show going. "Thank you, Roly-Poly Polly," he said. "Falling down on the job..."

The audience laughed.

"...and now, our next amazing hopefuls," said Kwif. "It's Toggle and Tweeter, the Metal Moon Moppets!"

Toggle and Tweeter stepped into the spotlight, and the audience clapped. They each had a big, fluffy mop. The band started a lively tune.

Springer wheeled the trolley out of Trundle's hotel room. It still had the silver lid on top. Springer was wearing the maid's frilly cap over his triangular hat. It was a rather feeble disguise, but he didn't have far to go.

Springer glanced to-and-fro. There was no-one around. He wheeled the trolley down the corridor, as fast as he could.

Toggle and Tweeter were dancing onstage. They waved their mops in time to the music, and started to sing.

"Clean the floor," sang Toggle.

"Clean the floor," sang Tweeter.

"It's a messy, mucky, filthy bore!" They sang this line together, in perfect harmony.

Toggle slumped a little. She pretended to work. "Up to our knees in oil and grime..."

Tweeter slumped too. "Scrubbing, sweeping, all the time!" The audience laughed at the robots. Things were going well.

But it wasn't much fun in the hotel room. Rota was perched on the bucket, although he wasn't guarding the money. The bucket was full of cream cakes.

Trundle was in a tricky situation. "Rota...come on!" he moaned. There was a thump, thump, thump as Trundle struggled to get free. "Don't guard the cakes," he said. "Do something!"

Rota's rotor-blades started to whirr. His grippers let go of the bucket.

Trundle had two rubber rings jammed round his body. They were red and white, from the Lanky Legs Liner. Trundle couldn't move his arms or legs. Rota flew over and pulled the rubber plugs. The air poured out with a hiss.

Springer pushed the trolley into a lift. It was meant for big deliveries. The lift stopped a few floors down, in the big space behind the stage. Springer wheeled the trolley out. He tossed the frilly cap away.

Springer ran to the pile of prizes. "All for me?" he said. "Splendid!" Springer picked up one of the prizes. He put it on the trolley.

Toggle and Tweeter were singing and dancing. Everyone loved their act. All except Stroller, who was lurking in the audience. His eye-stalks kept swivelling this way and that. He pushed past a chubby alien.

"Where's that cheating robot?" growled Stroller. "He must be here, somewhere." Stroller stared at the audience, but he was blocking the view.

"Excuse me!" said the chubby alien. He was most annoyed. This was an act worth watching.

"I'm sorry," said Stroller. "Business." He leant over the chubby alien. Maybe he knew something. "Seen a criminal?" asked Stroller.

The chubby alien grunted.

Trundle was the robot Stroller was looking for, but he was still in the hotel room. Trundle was jumping up and down. There was a thump, thump, thump as he did so. Trundle was trying to slip out of the rubber rings. They were getting flatter and flatter as the air rushed out.

Trundle was furious with Springer and all this trouble. It was meant to be a vacation! Trundle had been chased by sailors on the Lanky Legs Liner. Now the Coast Cops were after him.

"Springer wants the prizes, but they want me," said Trundle. "We've got to sort this out!"

The rubber rings slipped off Trundle, and landed on the carpet. He was free at last. Trundle stepped out of the rubber rings. "Come on, Rota," he said. "Let's go!"

Rota's rotor-blades started to whirr, but his grippers kept hold of the bucket. Rota took off and flew after Trundle. The bucket was a lot lighter now.

Springer had loaded the trolley with prizes, but he was standing by the biggest of all. It was the best prize! Just what he wanted! Now it was his, at last!

Springer could remember the label, so he spoke the words by heart. "Brand new model, best ever...the fantastic, the amazing..."

Springer tugged the ribbon. The sides of the box fell away. Inside was a...

"...solar-powered bubble car!" said Springer. "Time for the getaway!" Springer clapped his hands in glee.

The maid rushed into the hotel lobby. She waved her arms around. "Help...help!" she yelled. "A robbery!"

There was a lobby lizard behind the desk. He looked at the maid. He had one thing to say. "Where's your hat?"

* * * * *

The solar-powered bubble car was round, yellow and friendly. It had a big window like a glass bubble, and a sun-shaped solar panel on top. This made the rays of the sun into electric power, which made the bubble car go.

Springer stroked the bubble car. He couldn't wait to climb inside, but he needed somewhere to go. There was a chain hanging from the ceiling. Springer dashed over and grabbed it.

Springer lifted his feet off the ground, so his weight dragged the chain down. There was a grinding noise as a huge door opened. Springer could see a sunny drive, which was lined with palm trees. It led to the promenade.

Rota flew along the hotel corridor. He was still carrying the plastic bucket. Trundle ran along behind him.

Toggle and Tweeter were near the end of their song. They whirled their mops to the lively music.

Springer hooked the trolley onto the back of the bubble car. He jumped in and twisted the key, but the engine wouldn't start. "Drat!" said Springer. "No sun."

The sunlight shone through the open doorway...but not as far as the car.

Rota was a lot faster than Trundle. He flew through the hotel lobby. Trundle kept running, but he was some way behind. Rota swooped into the Cabaret Lounge. He buzzed over the audience.

Trundle was getting tired. He stopped by the door, and looked at the stage. It was good to see Toggle and Tweeter dancing with their mops.

Trundle looked at the audience, and scratched his head. "Where's that Springer?" he wondered.

Stroller was lurking in the audience. He spotted Trundle. "Hey! You're under arrest!" yelled Stroller. He pointed a claw. Some of the audience stared at Trundle.

Rota flew over the stage, where Toggle and Tweeter were dancing. Toggle heard the whirr of rotor-blades, but she didn't know it was Rota.

"Creepy-crawly!" squealed Toggle. She jumped back in fright. Toggle let go of her mop. It swept through the air.

Kwif was standing at the side of the stage. He heard a swooping sound, and looked round. Something fast and fluffy was flying towards him.

It wasn't a creepy-crawly. It was a mop. It whacked Kwif on the side of his head. His magnetic moustache fell off.

Tweeter dropped her mop on the floor. "I knew I'd seen him before," she gasped.

The band stopped playing, and Tweeter ran to the microphone. "That's not Vick Void," she said. "That's Kwif!"

The audience started to boo. Kwif looked terrified. He dodged behind the curtains.

Trundle was still watching the stage. He waved his arms in a wild manner. What was going on?

Stroller tapped Trundle on the shoulder. "The game's up, sonny," he said.

"Not me, you fool. Him!" said Trundle. He pointed at the stage and rushed off.

Stroller shook his head. It was very confusing. He took out his pocket radio. "Base!" said Stroller. "I need back-up, fast!"

There was a rasping voice on the radio. Someone was on their way.

Trundle climbed onto the stage, and dodged behind the curtains. Stroller started to follow him. He strolled as fast as he could.

Springer was sitting in the bubble car. He was trying to make it start. There was a handle if the car ran out of power. Springer was turning it like mad. The power dial flickered slightly, but he needed a lot more. "Come on, come on...!" said Springer.

Kwif burst through the curtains. Springer was trying to do a runner. "Springer! You cad!" yelled Kwif. "Where's my share?"

There was a whistling noise, like something falling. Kwif looked up. SPLAT! The bucket of cream cakes dropped on his head.

Rota was hovering up in the air. He had opened his grippers, at last.

Trundle burst through the curtains. "Looks like a sticky situation!"

Tweeter burst through the curtains. "Well done, Rota!" she smiled.

Stroller burst through the curtains, as cool as a nice chilled oil-shake. "Okay, nobody move!" said Stroller. He whipped out a gun.

Springer froze in the car. He had his hands on the handle. "Drat!" he fumed. There wasn't enough power. Springer snarled in anger.

* * * * *

Stalker was another detective, with a low hat and long mac. He had eyes on stalks, just like Stroller. He was also sick of crawling in the sea. Stalker looked like Stroller's twin brother. But he wasn't.

Stalker entered the hotel. He lurked in the lobby for a while. Stalker nodded at the lobby lizard behind the desk.

"Who are you, sir?" asked the lobby lizard.

"Back-up," said Stalker. He tapped his hat. Stalker started to stalk along the lobby, as if he had all the time in the world. Stalker looked this way, then that, and peered at the pot plants. But he didn't find any clues.

Stroller waved his gun at the bubble car, with a grim look on his face. Tweeter and Trundle stood still and silent. The cream cakes dribbled down Kwif.

"Nobody...move...a molecule," said Stroller. Springer was quivering with rage. They could hear the audience grumbling and moaning. The show had come to a very sudden end.

Stalker entered the Cabaret Lounge. He stalked between the tables. Stalker was a very polite detective, and he touched his hat to Toggle. She was still on the stage, with her fluffy mop. Toggle felt very confused.

"Don't worry, ma'am," said Stalker. "Under control."

Suddenly, there was a grinding noise. Toggle jumped back in fright. Mr. Glitz popped up through the trap-door. "They ruined my show!" he groaned.

"Your show?" asked Toggle. "What about Vick?"

Mr. Glitz was annoyed. "Vick this, Vick that," he said. "All I ever hear! I'm Mr. Glitz, the Cabaret King!"

"So...where's Vick?" asked Toggle.

Mr. Glitz shook his head. Another fan of Vick's with the wrong idea. "Camping on an asteroid," said Mr. Glitz. "He never came here. Had to get away from his fans."

Toggle sighed. It was a terrible shame. She wouldn't meet her hero, after all.

* * * * *

Things were still tricky behind the stage. Kwif, Trundle and Tweeter had their hands above their heads. Rota was hiding in a dark corner. Springer was stuck in the solar-powered bubble car, and Stroller was pointing his gun.

Stalker pushed through the curtains without making a sound. He crept behind the scoreboard for the hotel's quiz night, and a load of costumes for the shows. Stalker hid behind a plastic dino-slug suit. He peered over the top.

Stalker didn't like what he saw. A whole bunch of troublemakers. No wonder Stroller had asked for back-up. Stalker stepped out from the shadows. He was ready to help.

Stroller glanced at his Crime Squad partner. "It's a mean bunch," said Stroller. "Any ideas?"

Stalker had an idea. A bright idea! "Let's put some light on the situation..."

Stalker pulled a big switch. A spotlight came on. It lit the bubble car's solar cell.

The bubble car's dial shot up. It had loads of power. Springer cackled, and put his foot down. The car moved towards the doorway. It pulled the trolley of prizes behind it.

"No!" yelled Trundle. He ran over to the trolley, and jumped aboard.

The bubble car reached the doorway. Springer was dazzled by the brightness. The sun hit the solar cell.

Springer glanced at the dial. Full power!

"Yes!" said Springer. The bubble car streaked ahead. It sped through the doorway, with Trundle and the trolley.

"Dad!" yelled Tweeter. She ran through the doorway, waving her arms. Tweeter chased the bubble car along the drive. Rota flew along behind her.

Stalker and Stroller were a little dazed. What could they do now? There was only one robot left. The detectives both had the same idea. They aimed their guns at Kwif.

Kwif didn't look much of a criminal. He was still covered in jam and cream. Kwif trembled, and put up his hands. "Don't blame me!" he said.

* * * * *

The solar-powered bubble car raced along the drive. The trolley rattled along behind it. Trundle was clinging to the trolley. The palm trees zipped by in a blur.

Springer picked up the radio-phone. "Hello, Zipp?" he said. "I'm coming! Get ready to go! What? Go where...? Space! The getaway!"

On a small island, far out to sea, there was a dusty little spaceport. Zipp was a scruffy-looking alien in denim dungarees. He was sitting in a deckchair, taking it easy. There was a scruffy-looking spaceship behind him.

Zipp spoke into his phone with a tired drawl. "Right, Mr. Springer," he said. "All systems go." But they weren't going very fast.

Tweeter ran along the drive. Rota flew past her. But the bubble car swerved round the corner.

Tweeter reached the end of the drive. "Oh no," she gasped. The bubble car was a speck in the distance. It was racing along the promenade.

"We've lost 'em," sighed Tweeter. She wanted to cry.

But Rota had a better view. He flew around Tweeter's head, and settled on a good, solid perch. Rota beeped and beeped, but Tweeter didn't look. So Rota carried on beeping.

"Oh...what?" groaned Tweeter. There was nothing they could do. But Rota beeped again.

Tweeter looked at the tiny robot. Then she saw what he was sitting on. It was black, silver and big enough for two.

"Rota...you're a genius!" said Tweeter.

* * * * *

Springer was driving the bubble car along the promenade. There was plenty of sun and plenty of power. Nothing could stop him now.

Springer had a good view through the window, and a firm grip of the steering wheel. He wasn't giving way to anyone. Springer beeped the horn. "Move it!" he sneered. A group of tourists jumped out of the way. They shouted at Springer, but he didn't care.

"Oh, my," said Trundle. He closed his eyes. Trundle couldn't jump off.

The bubble car swerved round a potted palm. It streaked under an advertising poster. There were more tourists, and more beeps. The tourists jumped out of the way.

There was a purple tent a little way ahead. A face peered out from the shade. It was an elf-like face, with purple hair. Her ear-rings twinkled. She smiled.

Trundle could hear the tourists shouting at Springer. "You maniac!" yelled one.

"Speed freak!" yelled another.

There were other words too, in alien speech. It was lucky Springer couldn't understand them.

Trundle opened his eyes. He saw the purple tent. He'd seen that purple tent before. It belonged to the fortune teller, Lyza Lite. What had she told him? "I see luck...and trouble." Trundle was in trouble now.

Springer's sack of money was sitting on the ground. It was just by the fortune teller's tent. The bubble car raced by, and the sack was gone.

Lyza Lite watched the bubble car streak into the distance. It took Trundle and the trolley with it. "I see a golden future," she whispered.

Springer pulled his sack of money through the bubble car window. "All for me!" he smiled.

Trundle was trapped on the trolley, but he had to stop Springer. The Crime Squad were after him, so he'd get the blame. "What can I do?" groaned Trundle.

The bubble car raced through a paddling pool. It sprayed water everywhere. The kid aliens screamed like crazy. They hated being splashed.

Trundle glanced at the bubble car. He could see the sun-shaped solar panel, which was quite near the back. "Wait a minute," said Trundle. "I've got an idea!"

Trundle shuffled forward on the trolley. He lifted the dome-shaped silver lid. There were no cakes, but a plate of gold coins. His winnings!

Trundle kept the silver lid. He shuffled to the front of the trolley. This was going to be tricky, but maybe he could do it... Trundle stretched his arm as far as he could. Then he stretched it a little bit more. Trundle blocked the solar panel with the silver lid. "That's turned the lights out!" he said.

The gold coins were piled on a silver plate. But the pile wobbled, and the coins flew off.

Springer had one hand on the steering wheel. He hugged his sack of money with the other. But he noticed the speed dial was dropping. "Whaaat???" fumed Springer. Someone was causing trouble. Maybe he wasn't alone...

Springer turned a handle. It opened the sun-hatch, on the roof of the bubble car. There was a flash of sunlight and a whistle of wind.

Springer stuck his head through the sun-hatch, and looked back at the trolley. Springer snarled in anger. It was that stupid robot from the Lanky Legs Liner! He must have escaped from the rubber rings.

Springer waved a gun at Trundle. It was a nasty-looking six-shooter. "Stop meddling!" said Springer.

Trundle gulped. "Look, Springer...", he said.

But Springer wasn't in the mood for a chat. He fired his gun. There was a big, loud BANG!

Trundle whipped up the lid. There was a ping of metal, as the bullet bounced off his silver shield. The solar panel was out of the shade. The car picked up speed again.

The cat-like alien licked his lips. He'd bought another ice cone, and nothing would spoil it now. He was a cool cat! A frosty feline! He stretched his tongue and licked the ice. The bullet knocked the top off.

The bubble car raced along the promenade. It was tugging the trolley behind it. Springer had the gun, Trundle had the lid. Nobody was driving.

"You were lucky," said Springer. He lifted his gun. This time, he wouldn't miss.

There was a loud roar in the distance. It wasn't in the distance for long. Rota sped along the promenade. But this time, he wasn't flying. Rota was sitting on the front of Kwif's unicycle. He was shining like a golden badge.

Tweeter was wearing Kwif's unicycle helmet, and she gripped the handlebars. She had learnt it all from Kwif. Tweeter saw the trail of gold coins, glinting on the ground. "Always follow the money!" she said.

Tweeter's unicycle sped into the distance. It left a cloud of dust floating in the air. All was quiet for a moment, before the sounds of sirens grew louder. Two Coast Cop unicycles raced by.

One of the Coast Cops glanced at his partner, as the unicycles rode together. "Looks like a whole gang!" he said.

Tweeter switched on her unicycle's mini-TV. A picture appeared on the screen. It showed the view from the handlebars, but she could see that anyway.

"Go, Rota, go!" said Tweeter. "Check it out!" Rota whirred his rotor-blades and took off. Tweeter could see his view on the mini-TV.

Springer was pointing his gun at Trundle, as the bubble car raced along. There was still no-one at the wheel.

"All my life...I have been a villain," said Springer. "Why not join me, Trundle? We can work together...rob together...and spend it all at once!"

It was quite an offer. "Hmmm," said Trundle. "Half each, you mean?"

"Well, not half," said Springer. "Not exactly..."

Springer tried to think of a number, while the bubble car raced along. There was still no-one at the wheel.

Ledd was sitting on his glitzy unicycle, a short way ahead. He loved its glittering scarlet paintwork and fancy headlamps. It was better than Kwif's old banger. Ledd was polishing the wing mirrors and their precious gems. It was a job he always enjoyed.

Suddenly, the bubble car shot by. The trolley clattered along behind it. Ledd stopped his polishing and looked up. Rota shot by, followed by Tweeter on a unicycle. That was Kwif's unicycle, thought Ledd. There was something funny going on.

Ledd tilted his head. He was very curious. The Coast Cops shot by, with their sirens blaring. They were chasing the bubble car, the trolley, Rota and Tweeter.

"This looks like fun," said Ledd. He revved up his unicycle, and started chasing everyone else.

Springer was trying to bargain with Trundle. There was still no-one at the wheel. "I'll do you a deal," said Springer. "Sixty-forty...even a quarter. Hey...why not ten percent?"

But there was something a lot more urgent. "Look out!" yelled Trundle. He pointed ahead.

Springer turned. It was the bandstand, right in the way. Springer dropped back through the sun-hatch, and grabbed the steering wheel.

Trundle put the silver lid over his head. It made a good crash helmet, but he hoped he wouldn't need it.

Springer wrenched the steering wheel sideways. There was a screech of rubber tyres, as the bubble car veered round the bandstand. Trundle closed his eyes and held on tight. His silver helmet flew off.

Rota weaved through the decorated columns of the bandstand. There was a band playing a gentle waltz, but they didn't take any notice. Rota came out the other side, and flew above the promenade. He spotted the bubble car just below. Rota swooped down after it.

Tweeter could see the bubble car on the unicycle's mini-TV. It showed her everything Rota could see. Tweeter was thinking hard. What could she do?

"We've got to block the solar panel!" said Tweeter.

Springer was back at the steering wheel, and the bubble car was back on course. Springer picked up the radio-phone. "Hello, Zipp?" he said. "Not long! How's the getaway ship?"

On a small island, far out to sea, Zipp was taking it easy. He sat in his deckchair sipping a drink. The scruffy-looking spaceship was chugging away. "It's warming up, boss," said Zipp.

Springer put down the radio-phone. Zipp had better be right.

Tweeter was still thinking. She was thinking hard. It was hard to think and drive at the same time, but Tweeter did her best. "What can we do...?" she wondered. She had to be quick.

There was a clear run ahead, so Tweeter glanced at the beach. There were loads of tourists sunning themselves. Some were playing games. Tweeter saw a beach ball bounce in the air, but that wasn't any use. Then she spotted something else. It looked very useful.

Tweeter spoke into her golden microphone. "Rota! I've got an idea," she said. "Try the beach!"

Rota veered away from the bubble car.

* * * * *

Two orange kid aliens were throwing a frisbee. They wore purple and yellow shorts, with silver diving gear on their backs. Tweeter had met them when she first arrived on Beach Ball.

The kid aliens were having a lot of fun. There was only one thing they liked better than diving, and that was playing frisbee. The frisbee was half way between the kid aliens. But Rota swooped past, grabbed it and flew away.

"Our frisbee!!!" cried the kid aliens.

Ledd's unicycle was speeding up. He drove between the Coast Cops. "Hey - you're speeding!" said one of the Coast Cops.

"Pull over," said the other.

"Speeding? Look at them!" said Ledd. The bubble car was way ahead. Tweeter was close behind it.

Trundle was still clinging to the trolley, but he noticed something overhead. Trundle looked up in amazement. There was a dark, round shape moving over the sun. A shadow blocked the bubble car's solar panel.

"What...?" gasped Springer. "This can't be happening!" He fumed as the speed dial dropped, and the bubble car slowed down.

Tweeter's unicycle was catching up with the bubble car. She chugged along beside the trolley, and waved at Trundle. "Hi, Dad! Like the eclipse?" smiled Tweeter.

Trundle glanced up. "Came in handy!" he said. Rota was flying overhead. He was gripping the frisbee with his grippers.

Springer bashed the speed dial, which was nearly at zero. But bashing wouldn't do any good. He popped up through the sun-hatch and looked at the sky.

"Drat!" spat Springer. "An eclipse? It can't be!" He whipped out his gun, and fired a bullet in the air.

Rota flinched. The bullet punched a hole in the frisbee. It went straight through the middle, and only just missed him.

A thin beam of sunlight fell through the hole. It hit the solar panel, which made a tiny bit of power. The bubble car moved ahead.

"Gotcha!" said Springer. He dropped back through the sun-hatch.

Tweeter waved at Trundle. "Dad! Come on!" she yelled.

Springer grabbed the steering wheel and cackled in glee. The speed dial was rising again. The car hummed with power.

Trundle slid to the edge of the trolley. He put one foot on the unicycle. Trundle stood there for a second, half way between the two. Then he let go of the trolley.

It was just in time. The bubble car was speeding up. It took the trolley with it. "Welcome aboard!" smiled Tweeter.

"Thanks, Tweeter," said Trundle. He had never been on a unicycle before, but it was a lot better than a runaway trolley. Trundle sat on the back seat.

Trundle was safe, which was the main thing. But Springer still had the prizes. Maybe Springer was the winner, after all.

"He's getting away!" groaned Tweeter.

"Not for long," said Trundle. He had a surprise in store.

Tweeter glanced back at Trundle, and gasped. He was amazing! Trundle's flat cap opened like a hatch, but there was something underneath. Something very special. It sparkled in the sun.

Trundle took out the Crazy Diamond. "Keep it under your hat!" he said.

Springer stopped cackling as the speed dial dropped. He glanced back through the window, and seethed in fury.

Tweeter was riding the unicycle beside the bubble car. Rota still had the frisbee, which blocked the sun. But a sunbeam shone through the hole.

Trundle was sitting on the unicycle. He held the Crazy Diamond in the path of the sunbeam. It bent the sunbeam away from the solar panel. "Shine on, Crazy Diamond!" said Trundle.

Springer could also see the Coast Cop unicycles. They were catching up with the chase. "Drat!" spat Springer. He was fuming mad. Springer wrenched the steering wheel.

The bubble car turned sideways, away from Tweeter's unicycle. It was now clear of the frisbee, and the sun hit the solar panel. The speed dial rose, there was a hum of power. The bubble car sped up again.

There was a fantastic pier which stuck out to sea. It had all kinds of rides and amusements. Springer drove the bubble car through a wide archway. He raced straight along the pier.

Springer picked up the radio-phone. "Zipp! Zipp!" he said, urgently. "Make it a submarine!"

The Coast Cops zoomed along the promenade. They caught up with Tweeter's unicycle, but Tweeter turned and followed Springer. The Coast Cop unicycles screeched to a stop. After spinning round in confusion, they raced after Tweeter.

The promenade was quiet for a moment. The sea washed the beach with a gentle hiss, as the chase faded into the distance.

A beach lizard lifted its head and looked around. It started to creep forward. The lizard changed from yellow to promenade grey as it wriggled off the sand.

But not everyone had gone to the pier. Rota was hovering in the air. He let go of the frisbee, which glided away.

Stroller scooted along on Tweeter's skateboard. It was a lot quicker than strolling. "Hey! Where's all the action?" yelled Stroller. He was wearing the yellow heart-shaped sunglasses.

The two orange kid aliens were whining on the beach. That creepy-crawly had spoilt their fun! But one saw something up in the sky. He watched as it glided down.

The kid alien held up a long, orange finger. The frisbee dropped out of the sky. His finger slid through the bullet hole. It was a perfect fit.

* * * * *

Springer's bubble car raced along the seaside pier. The trolley clattered along behind it. Springer swerved the bubble car left and right, dodging columns, benches and fun-rides. Some of the prizes fell off the trolley. The tourists leapt out of the way.

Tweeter and Trundle followed on their unicycle. The Coast Cops finally caught up. One of the Coast Cops glanced at Tweeter. She could see her face reflected in his helmet.

"Leave it to us!" said the Coast Cop. They overtook Tweeter's unicycle, and sped along after Springer.

There was a huge bouncy castle at the end of the pier. It had towers and turrets, like a real castle, but it was made of rubber and filled with air. The Castle Keeper had a shack by the drawbridge, where he sat and read the Beach Ball News. It was always full of chit-chat, although nothing ever happened to him.

The bouncy castle was a very quiet place. There hadn't been many bouncers today. Some kids had bounced for an hour, but they'd all gone home. That was how the Castle Keeper liked it. A big bouncy castle, all to himself. It made him feel very important.

But there was something funny going on. He was sure of it. The Castle Keeper lowered his paper and listened. He could hear a hum of electric power and the roar of engines. They were becoming louder and louder.

The Castle Keeper threw down his paper and jumped out of his shack. He was wearing a bouncy rubber suit, with a bouncy rubber cap on his head. He spotted Springer's bubble car. It wasn't slowing down.

"Hey!" yelled the Castle Keeper. "No vehicles in the bouncy castle!" He grabbed a handle and cranked it round. The chains of the bouncy drawbridge tightened.

Springer had nowhere else to go, so he beeped the horn and kept on going. The bubble car raced up the drawbridge, and landed on the bouncy floor. The drawbridge started to rise.

The Coast Cop unicycles screeched to a halt, one each side of the drawbridge. The Castle Keeper was cranking the handle. The drawbridge was still rising.

The Coast Cops could hear another unicycle, which was racing along the pier. "Slow down!" yelled Trundle. He was terrified. This was more scary than the trolley!

But Tweeter remembered what Kwif had told her, after their narrow escape from the Coast Cops. "It's not the quickest unicycle," said Tweeter, "but it jumps the best!"

Tweeter pulled back the handlebars. The wheel shot out on its springy spike, and the unicycle jumped in the air.

"Wheee!" yelled Tweeter as they curved overhead. The Coast Cops watched in amazement as the unicycle dropped behind the half-closed drawbridge.

The unicycle landed with a bounce, not a crash. Tweeter and Trundle bounced off their seats, but they both made a very soft landing. The robots tried to stand on the wobbly floor.

The drawbridge slammed shut as Rota arrived. He was too late to fly inside.

Tweeter pointed across the quivering castle. "Look!" she said. Trundle did. They could see the bubble car, with the trolley a short way off. The stolen prizes lay scattered all over the place. But the floor was soft, so they hadn't been broken.

Springer climbed out of the bubble car. He had the six-shooter in his hand. "So! You've ruined my plans," said Springer.

"Put down the gun, Springer," said Trundle.

But Springer didn't put down the gun. "Why should I listen to a factory slave?" he said. "You do your job, I'll do mine - which is living by my wits."

"It's just a vacation," gasped Tweeter. "It got out of hand."

Trundle nodded. "It's not our fault, Springer," he said. "The Cops think I'm the robber."

"Shut up!" snarled Springer. "Give me the diamond."

"I won it fair and square," said Trundle.

"I play a different game," said Springer. He pointed his gun at Trundle.

"We're not robbers," said Tweeter.

Springer cackled. "You're not robbing anything of mine..."

Springer fired his gun. Tweeter shrieked, but Trundle jumped out of the way. The bullet punched through the wall of the bouncy castle. There was a sudden hiss of air.

Springer aimed his gun at Tweeter - but Trundle landed on the bouncy floor. He sent Tweeter flying into the air. The second bullet punched through the wall.

The bullet flew past the Coast Cops with a whistling noise. "They've popped the bouncy castle!" yelled the Castle Keeper.

The cat-like alien was sucking a delicious drink from a long, delicate glass. Nothing would spoil it now. He was a cool cat! A frosty feline! But the bullet smashed the glass into tiny pieces.

The cat was left with a drinking straw, and smoke poured from the end. He stubbed the straw on the cafe table. "I'll go to Sandy Star next year," he sighed.

The Coast Cops had dived for cover. But they popped up their heads. "What now, Boss?" asked one of the Cops.

"Er...pull the plug!" said the other.

Rota heard the Coast Cops, and knew what to do. Rota flew to the air plug on the side of the bouncy castle. He gripped it hard with his grippers.

It was a lot bigger than the plugs on the rubber rings. Rota whirled his rotor-blades, and pulled with all his might. There was a sucking sound, then a whoosh of air. Rota had pulled the plug!

Springer looked up in alarm. There was something wrong with the bouncy castle. The ceiling, arches and walls were starting to sag. He was running out of time.

Trundle and Tweeter bounced up and down. Springer tried bouncing, too. Springer fired another shot. Trundle bounced out of the way.

"Drat!" spat Springer. He fired another shot. Tweeter bounced out of the way.

Springer shook his head. He was going mad. Then Trundle landed right in front of him, and Springer lifted the gun. This time, he wouldn't miss.

"Don't move," said Springer, "or I'll shoot Kwif's little girlfriend."

Tweeter was high in the air. "Dad!" she yelled.

"Oh, my...", said Trundle. He closed his eyes.

Springer pressed the trigger. The gun just clicked. "Blast," said Springer. He had used all the bullets.

Trundle jumped up. Tweeter dropped down. Trundle grabbed her hand in the air.

"Out of the window," said Trundle. "Come on!"

Trundle and Tweeter bounced over the wobbly floor. They reached a long, narrow window. Trundle lifted Tweeter over the edge. Then he climbed over with a groan.

Springer stood alone among the scattered prizes. He shook his head sadly, and tossed the gun away. Springer sat down by the bubble car. The game was over. He had lost.

The rubber walls were sloping now. The robots slid gently to the deck of the pier. The bouncy towers collapsed behind them, so the castle was nothing but a pile of rubber.

Tweeter hugged Trundle. "We're safe!" she laughed. Rota flew around their heads, bleeping. The Coast Cops looked at each other. What was going on?

But there was someone else heading their way. The robots heard a squeaking noise, and looked round.

Stroller arrived on Tweeter's skateboard. He stared at the pile of rubber. Stroller nodded to the Coast Cops. "I guess that wraps up the case."

On a small island, far out to sea, there was a dusty little spaceport. The scruffy-looking spaceship was chugging away, while Zipp sat in his deckchair sipping a drink. He liked to take things slowly, but this was far too slow. The sun was going down. Zipp put down his drink, and shook his head. "Well, I guess Springer isn't coming," he said.

* * * * *

The planet Beach Ball was a beautiful place, but the robots couldn't stay forever. It had been a great break from the Metal Moon. Tweeter had a great story.

"We had two days left of our vacation," said Tweeter, "and it took both to get Dad out of trouble. By the time they said he was free to go, it was back to the Metal Moon."

Tweeter stared at the planet Beach Ball. It was floating among the stars. It was a brilliant blue planet with a spectacular ring. The islands were green and yellow.

But Tweeter wasn't flying through space. She had a tiny model planet in a little glass ball, which she held in her silver fingers.

Tweeter shook the ball and the stars twinkled. "I bought this star-storm as a souvenir," she said. "Pretty, isn't it?"

The Metal Moon sky was green and cloudy. It was always green and cloudy. The hotel and beach were far away, so Tweeter was stuck with the Play Park.

Tweeter was sitting on the swings with Cog. He stared at the little star-storm. "No! I don't believe it," said Cog. The wheels on his chest started to spin. Cog had never heard a story like this.

Tweeter smiled. "Really, Cog," she said. "I'm telling the truth!"

Cog looked at Tweeter and scratched his head. "You mean...a robot with a springy moustache...some Crazy Coral and a unicycle chase...a big hotel with top, top prizes...and a Crazy Diamond for the winner?"

Tweeter smiled. "You know it all!" she said.

"I'm a genius!" said Cog.

"But it's not quite the end," said Tweeter.

"It isn't?" gasped Cog. He had to know more.

"Dad was still upset about the accident," said Tweeter. "Mom took him to the site of the old factory."

"That doesn't sound very happy," said Cog.

Tweeter shook her head. "Just listen..."

* * * * *

Toggle and Trundle stared at the empty space where the rocket factory had been. There was a deep hole in the ground, with fences round the edge. A huge crane lifted girders, and robots looked at plans. They would soon build another factory, bigger and better than ever.

Toggle put her arm round Trundle as he gazed at a new landmark. It was a statue of Stoke holding a spanner, with his name written on the base. It was twice the size of the real Stoke, so the robots looked very small.

Trundle shook his head sadly. "Poor old Stoke," he said. "I miss him. But what about Reckner? Who cares?"

Toggle didn't know what to say. They stood there together, in silence. But a large, chunky shadow crept over the ground. It rose up the base of the statue.

Trundle had seen that shape before. He gasped, and turned his head with a squeak of metal. There was a robot behind him.

"Reckner!"

Trundle was right. It was Reckner. He looked a lot more worn, and patched together - but he was still his old self. Trundle gave him a big hug.

"Easy, boy," smiled Reckner. He patted Trundle on the back.

Toggle put her hand to her eyes. "Oh, my!"

"But...I thought you were blown to smithereens!" said Trundle.

Reckner snorted. "I shot right into space with the factory...but when it blew up, I was blown out the pipe. Been floating around for weeks."

"Not much of a vacation," sighed Toggle.

"View was pretty, though," said Reckner. "Saw Arrid, Shima...many a moon. Then I was picked up by a Garbage Grinder and dropped back home."

Trundle stared at Reckner in amazement. "So...what you doing now?" he asked.

"Sweeping the streets," said Reckner. "No place for me in the new factory. But at least I'm ticking along."

Trundle nodded. "Poor old Stoke..."

"We'll never forget him," said Reckner. He looked up at the statue.

They shared a moment, thinking of their friend. Stoke was only a statue, but his eyes looked down upon them. They knew he would always be there.

The wind blew some litter, so it danced in the air. There was a spatter of acid rain. The robots turned away from the statue. They left the factory yard.

* * * * *

Tweeter, Toggle and Trundle were home again. Reckner was there too. They sat around laughing and joking. It looked like a golden future.

Toggle and Tweeter had nice chilled oil-shakes, and they sipped them through plastic straws. Trundle and Reckner sipped glasses of real Brown Oil. They liked something a bit stronger.

"...so that was the end of Springer," said Trundle, telling the story at last. "Got done for robbery, cheating, speeding and bursting a bouncy castle."

"Poor guy," said Reckner. He shook his heavy metal head.

"I still feel sorry for Kwif," said Tweeter. "I've sent him a card in prison."

"Good for you," said Reckner.

"Pah! He's a good-for-nothing," snorted Trundle.

Toggle raised her hand. She didn't want any moaning. "Trundle," she said. "Show Reckner the new TV!"

"Yep! They gave us one of the prizes," said Trundle. He pressed a button on the remote control. A big TV came on. The screen showed a colourful soap opera, with supersonic sound.

"That's a good picture!" said Reckner.

"Came with a satellite dish," said Trundle. "We've got twenty-four million channels."

The sun was setting on the Metal Moon. It glowed an emerald green. The dish was fixed to a metal fence, which ran around the yard. It was pointing at the cloudy sky. A red light flashed in the middle.

Rota didn't like sitting inside. The TV was far too boring. He buzzed around by the satellite dish. Rota was very, very curious.

Rota landed on top of the dish, and rested his rotor-blades. He had a great view of the Factory Zone, far below. But the dish started tilting with his weight.

Rota flew away as the dish toppled forwards. Trundle hadn't fixed it very well. The dish dropped off the edge of the suburban saucer, and fell towards the distant lights. There was a wire trailing across the yard. The loops unwound, quickly.

The robots watched the family on the TV screen. There was a lot of screaming and shouting. It wasn't much fun.

"Oh...enough of that!" said Trundle. He pressed the remote control.

The wire kept unwinding, but it ran out of loops. It ripped the plug from the back of the TV. The picture fizzled out.

There was a moment of silence. Reckner shook his head. "I think it's broken," he said.

Trundle waved his arms. "Arrgh...!" he yelled. "I can't watch the Wheeli-ball! What about the Wheeli-ball?"

"Hey...where's Rota?" said Tweeter. "What's he up to? Rota!" Tweeter ran out of the room.

Toggle shook her head. They were home alright! But there was something else to enjoy.

"Oh...let's listen to the radio," sighed Toggle.

Reckner chuckled.

Toggle clicked the switch on her ghetto-blaster. There was a loud fizzing noise.

Reckner was curious. "Vick Void...?"

"He's back on the Metal Moon!" gasped Toggle. She twiddled with the tuning knob, and bouncy music filled the room.

"Hmm...", sighed Toggle. "I wonder what he looks like?"

It was just one of a million robot homes, crammed on the Metal Moon.

The End

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