DANGER AT L5!

THE STARMAN SERIES
by Michael D. Cooper

MUTINY ON MARS

THE RUNAWAY ASTEROID

JOURNEY TO THE TENTH PLANET

DESCENT INTO EUROPA

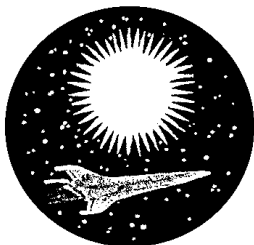THE LOST RACE OF MARS

DANGER AT L5!

THE LOST TOMRROW*

DOOMSDAY HORIZON

THE HEART OF DANGER

THE LAST COMMAND

* The full text of the novelette,
The Lost Tomorrow,
appeared as a serial in "The Starman Chronicles"
and is available only through the
Starman web site at www.StarmanSeries.com.

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By Michael D. Cooper

Cover artwork by Jonathan Cooper

A David Foster Starman Adventure
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INTRODUCTION

Late in 2003, while working on the plot outline for the last three Starman books, I decided to take the time to plot two new Starman short stories. By this point it had become clear that we would not write the 23 books that we had originally outlined; the series would have only eight volumes, and the other stories would never materialize. One of those books, though, had a special fascination for me, and I wanted to see if I could bring it at least partially to life.

That book was *Danger at L5!* The idea behind it was a little different: instead of a normal Starman adventure it was to be a collection of short stories that took place on board the L5 space station. The stories were intended to be a little crazy – instead of the drama and adventure that the Starmen usually faced, they would have to deal with problems that were blown completely out of proportion by bizarre characters. It was almost like taking time out for a comedy break, and I thought it would be a good change of pace.

With this in mind I outlined two stories: *The Plight of the Bumblebee*, recounting the Starmen's efforts to track down a runaway robot, and *The Ultimate Code*, the Starmen's attempt to decipher a coded message. I immensely enjoyed plotting the stories and looked forward to the day that David Baumann and I would bring them to

life.

Unfortunately, that day never came. We finished *Doomsday Horizon*, *The Heart of Danger*, and *The Last Command*, and in 2005 the series came to a close without either of these stories seeing the light of day. I was somewhat saddened by this, but by that point we had written more than half a million words and were exhausted. The series had come to a close.

It looked as if those two stories would never be written, but in 2007 I began writing other short stories and thought hey – why not take some time out from my usual routine and write them as well? It would be a challenge but I didn't think it would be that difficult, and it sounded like fun. So, without further ado, I wrote both short stories and published them on my blog.

This book is simply a printed version of those two short stories. We hope you enjoy them!

Jonathan Cooper
May 9, 2007

DANGER AT L5!

It was evening on Mars. Starman Mark Seaton was sitting on his porch beside his wife Stenafi, enjoying a cool and peaceful evening. Their home was located on a small hill on the outskirts of the great Kilindra Forest. In front of them was a vast, green landscape, stretching as far as the eye could see – one of many new wonders on a Mars that was rapidly coming to life. Stenafi was holding their infant daughter Dianda, who was fast asleep. They had lived in their home for three years now, and Mark fell deeper in love with the planet Mars and its people with every passing day.

Mark had spent the evening recounting some of his adventures to his wife. As an Ahmanyan she was familiar with some of his exploits – most notably the ones that had directly involved the Ahmanyans – but others were entirely new to her. Mark was just finishing up one of his stories.

"And that was really the end of my part of it," he was saying. "By the time I regained consciousness Zip and Joe had it all wrapped up."

"I'm surprised you survived," Stenafi told him. "You fell out of the sky! I am not surprised you were in the hospital for six weeks; I'm surprised that they ever let you out at all."

"I think of it more as a crash landing." Mark said. "After all – "

"You fell all the way out of Earth orbit," she said. "I'm sure that happens all the time. Tell me, how is it that in all of your adventures you never once failed to accomplish your mission?"

A pained look spread across Mark's face. "Well," he said slowly, "there was this one time – " he stopped.

Her eyes got wide. "Now this I must here," she said. "Please, do tell."

"It was kind of – um – embarrassing, I guess," he replied. "It happened right before our return trip to Europa..."

THE PLIGHT OF THE BUMBLEBEE

Chapter 1

JUNE 13, 2153 began as a peaceful day for Richard Starlight. On that fateful afternoon the CEO of Starlight Enterprise found himself in his office making the final preparations for an expedition to Europa. Starlight Enterprise had been interested in returning to Jupiter's watery moon ever since Starmen Zip Foster, Joe Taylor, and Mark Seaton made the trip there that had so nearly cost them their lives. In another four months those same Starmen would be making a return visit, and Richard still had a lot of arrangements to make before they could leave.

Over the past few months Richard's life had seen great changes. Ever since his battle with Ban Zhou Men on the plains of Mars he had been trying to refocus the energies of his company to reflect a new and dangerous world. No longer was Earth safe; now there was a rapacious alien threat lurking on the horizon – a threat that Richard knew would soon be more than just hypothetical. What he did not know was what could be done about it.

Richard reclined in his chair and looked out over his office. Starlight Tower was located forty miles north of Amundsen City, where it had stood for almost twenty years as the tallest building on the Moon. His private office was on the 121st floor and could only be reached by two private express

elevators. The beauty of the lunar landscape was always fresh and new to him; through his office's treated glass walls he could see the cratered gray landscape stretch for miles into the distance. His red parakeet – a marvel of genetic engineering – chirped quietly on its stand behind his chair. *I do my best thinking up here*, he thought. *Now -*

The phone rang. Richard saw that it was an urgent call on his private line and quickly pressed a button on his desk. The image of a harried individual was projected into the air over his desk.

"Richard!" the individual shouted. "It's terrible! You must *do* something!"

Richard smiled. He immediately recognized the caller as his long-time friend Alfred Nelson, the easily excitable director of the L5 space station. He had met him as a child when his father Thomas Starlight was supervising the construction of the station, and he had kept in touch with him ever since. *He had to be in his 70's by now*, he thought, *and yet he hasn't changed a bit.*

"It's good to see you," Richard said warmly. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"I can't – no, I just can't explain it over the phone," he said urgently, "it's too important. The safety of the entire Solar System is at stake! I need your best Starmen here immediately. We don't have much time!"

Richard was a little surprised. His friend had a tendency to become agitated but this was exceptional. "I'll send one of my top people right over," he promised. "Can you give me any idea

what is going on? If there is something seriously wrong - "

"Oh, yes, there *is*," Mr. Nelson repeated. "There most certainly is, and – well – no, I just can't say anything. But please – you must hurry!" And at that, Mr. Nelson severed the connection.

Richard folded his hands together and thought for a moment. Mr. Nelson had a long history of over-dramatizing small concerns, but he knew that he would never have called if there wasn't something actually wrong. The L5 space station that he managed was the largest one in the entire Solar System and did make a tempting target. Given the recent incursion that the Starmen had battled a few months ago he did not dare ignore the message. The question was, which of his Starmen were currently available for an immediate trip into Earth orbit?

He decided to contact David Foster. Zip was currently on the Moon, enjoying some well-earned time off by visiting his parents at their home on the outskirts of Amundsen City. Richard was in luck as Zip answered his compad almost immediately.

"I need you to make an emergency trip to L5 for me," Richard said after pleasantries had been exchanged. "I just received an urgent call from a very animated Alfred Nelson, who requested immediate assistance. Are Mark and Joe with you?"

"Yes they are," Zip replied, "and we can leave right away. What seems to be the trouble?"

"I don't really know. Alfred refused to talk to me over the phone. He claimed that all of

mankind was in danger and that it had to be discussed in person. I haven't heard any other reports of trouble but I don't think we can take any chances."

"We'll come prepared for anything, then. What's the fastest way to get there?"

"Probably by shuttle, Zip. I'll call the Amundsen City spaceport and have our personnel there prepare one for you."

"We're heading out the door right now. I'll let you know what's going on as soon as I can. Zip out."

Chapter 2

DAVID FOSTER, Mark Seaton, and Joe Taylor had been enjoying a late-afternoon meal in an obscure restaurant in Amundsen City when Richard called. They had spent the day discussing their upcoming mission to Europa, and were just finishing dinner when Zip answered his compad. After Zip hung up he briefed his friends on what had happened.

"It sounds urgent," Joe said, "and I don't have any of my equipment with me."

"I'm sure that Richard will have everything prepared for us by the time we get to the spaceport," Mark said, as he paid for their meal. "I just wonder what's going on."

"We'll soon find out," Zip said. The three of

them walked out of the restaurant and began hurrying down the sidewalk. Joe was heading for their car when Zip stopped him.

"There's too much traffic to drive," he said. "The subway would be much faster than trying to fight rush-hour traffic."

The three Starmen rushed over to the nearest subway stop, where they boarded an underground high-speed monorail. They had to change trains twice, but within twenty minutes they were at the spaceport.

"I wish we could take the *Star Ranger*," Zip said wistfully as they began jogging through the spaceport terminals. The Starlight Enterprise section of the spaceport was almost within sight.

"I'm sure we can, Zip, if Richard doesn't mind our waiting for – oh, another ten years," Joe replied. "After all, there were probably a few parts to our ship that they were able to salvage. Doorknobs, for instance."

"To be honest I'm surprised they decided to fix her at all," Mark replied. "There really wasn't a lot left of her after Zip fought off the Ban Zhou Men's attack – especially after you reversed the thrust in mid-air, Zip, and clipped off the tail of the attacker - "

" – thus neatly grounding the attacking ship without damaging it," Zip replied, fondly remembering the incident. "I really didn't think she had it in her. When they get done with the repairs, though, she'll be a new ship, and the fastest one in space at that! The antimatter drive alone give us more power than even the *Spud Peeler* did."

"Which was another fine craft that got obliterated in the line of duty," Joe said. "Maybe we're not just reading the owner's manual closely enough."

By this time the three Starmen had reached the Starlight Enterprise wing of the spaceport, where a uniformed SE officer was ready and waiting.

"Starman Zip Foster?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes, ma'am," Zip said, stepping forward to shake her hand. "I'm sorry," he said, eyeing the jeans and T-shirts that the three of them were wearing, "we were out, and didn't have time to stop and change into our red uniforms. We were hoping – "

"Right this way," she said, turning around and walking down a hallway. "The craft is here, in Hangar 9. It is fueled and ready to go. Your departure time is in five minutes. Please be ready for takeoff." With that, she turned around and walked off down the hall.

The three Starmen entered the hangar, boarded the ship, and prepared for takeoff. Joe sat in the pilot's seat and the other two Starmen took up seats directly behind him. The craft was a small, sleek passenger shuttle that was designed to transport up to four people to and from any location in the Earth-Moon system within a few hours.

"The *Red Tiger*," Joe said aloud. "I've never flown this craft before, but she looks pretty fast. You just don't see too many shuttles with antimatter drives – the technology is just too new."

"How fast?" Zip asked. Joe was silent for a few minutes as he opened the hangar door, taxied the shuttle out onto the runway, and prepared for takeoff.

"Oh, we'll probably be there in about an hour or so."

The takeoff went very smoothly and before ten minutes had passed the craft had left the moon and was streaking through space on a course to L5. After making sure that everything was operating normally Joe set the craft on auto-pilot and settled back into the pilot's chair.

"I wonder what's going on, anyway?" Joe asked. "I've never heard of anything going wrong at L5 before."

"Why don't you call them up and ask?" Mark replied, motioning toward the ship's communicator. "I'm sure that Alfred Nelson would love to know that we are en-route."

"Good idea," Joe said approvingly. He was able to contact the station and speak directly to the station director, letting them know that they would be there in about 45 minutes. The director curtly acknowledged Joe's message and then abruptly signed off.

"Um." Joe said. "Well, I guess we'll find out when we get there."

*   *   *   *

Forty minutes later the ship was within visual range of the giant L5 space station. Mark had seen it many times before but it never failed to fill him with awe. The station was the most massive

structure in space; it was home to 30,000 people and bustled with the activity of countless spaceships going about their business all hours of the day and night. L5, so named because it was located at LaGrange Point 5, was composed of two giant wheels, each connected to the other by means of a cylinder that ran between the middle of the two wheels. The station did not spin but instead used an artificial gravity grid to provide Earth-like gravity to its residents. Mark reflected that it must be nearly fifty years old, but Alfred Nelson was still its director. That was a long time to spend running a space station, he thought.

As the *Red Tiger* approached the station Joe contacted it once more and requested permission to dock. "Look at all those ships!" Joe enthused. "Now *there* is some variety for you."

"No kidding," Zip said. "Is that an *Ares*-class ship over there? I didn't realize any of those were still flying. It can't possibly land on a planet, can it?"

"I don't think so," Mark said. "Those ships were built to travel solely in space, carrying cargo from one space station to another. It's probably just come back from the asteroid belt with a cargo full of processed ore and is dropping it off at the L5, where some other ship will carry it down to Earth. It'll probably return with a cargo of food and other perishable goods for lonely asteroid miners."

"I'm sure George St George will appreciate that," Zip remarked, thinking of the eccentric asteroid miner that they had met a few years ago. "He's still prospecting out there, isn't he?"

"Last I heard," Mark said affirmatively.

Joe received clearance from the automated docking system and turned over the *Red Tiger*'s navigation to the station computer, which robotically guided it into a hangar. "Looks as though we've got ourselves a reception crew," Zip muttered as Joe powered down the ship and opened the doors. Standing just outside were three armed guards.

The Starmen exited the craft and walked forward to meet them, eying them warily. "I'm David Foster, and this is Joe Taylor and Mark Seaton," he said, introducing his friends. "We've come -"

The largest guard interrupted them. "Howard, Fine, and Howard, at your service," he said curtly. "Right this way." He opened a door leading into the station and stepped through it, while the other two guards beckoned the three Starmen to follow him. They did so, and the two guards followed them in the rear.

"We were told that there was a serious problem here," Zip began again, "and Richard sent us to help. Do you know what is going on?"

"Right this way," the lead guard repeated, walking on down the hall. The three Starmen followed them. What, Zip wondered, was the nature of their emergency?

Chapter 3

"Is there a longer route that we could take from the hangar to Nelson's office?" Joe asked Zip.

Zip shook his head grimly. The director's office was some distance from the hangar, and the guards seemed determined to take the longest possible route to their destination. They were probably new, Zip thought, and not well-acquainted with the layout of the station. Had it not been for the urgency of their situation he might not have minded; the station reflected Thomas Starlight's love for elegance and grace, and he marveled at its beauty. Instead of dark, narrow corridors the base was filled with large, open spaces; there were tall galleries, waterfalls, small streams, trees, and even simulated glass ceilings through which streamed a soft, yellow light. Tom had gone to great lengths to make the base feel as Earth-like as possible and the effort had paid off; he understood how people could spend their lives here and not feel as though they were cramped inside a metal container out in space.

It took them a full ten minutes to arrive at the director's office. The guards deposited the Starmen in the secretary's office and then, to their surprise, abruptly left. The secretary seemed unruffled as she pressed a button on her desk.

"Three Starmen from Starlight Enterprise are here to see you," she said calmly. "At least, I think

they're Starmen."

"Send them in immediately!" the director barked. "There's no time to waste!"

The secretary gestured toward the director's office door but did not move to open it for them. Zip walked up, opened it, and stepped inside.

Mark had to admit that Alfred Nelson had a real taste for interior design. The office was decorated in a beautiful African theme: it had a large mahogany desk, a comfortable-looking couch decorated with a print of animals from the African plains, shelves filled with books on the Dark Continent, and pictures of what he guessed was Alfred Nelson on various African hunting expeditions. Hanging on the wall behind the director's desk was a pair of ancient rifles, but curiously, he didn't see any mounted animal remains. To one side of the room was a wide, low glass case that was filled with odd models. Mark spotted a very old-looking motorcycle, airship, and submarine that had to date back to at least the 1920's, if not earlier.

Before the Starmen even had a chance to introduce themselves the director spoke up. "I'm so glad you're here!" he said. He acted as if he was going to say more, and then stopped, got out of his chair behind his desk, and began pacing around the room. "It's terrible, just terrible," he said, as if to himself. "You've got to *do* something!"

"How can we help you, Mr. Nelson?" Zip asked. "Richard Starlight told us that you have a problem."

"*I* have a problem! *We* have a problem!" he

shouted. "*Earth* has a problem, young man! If you don't do something they're going to destroy us all!"

"Who is going to destroy us all?" Mark asked.

"The Xenobots! They're here!"

The Starmen were astonished. "Xenobots?" Joe asked. "Here? Where?"

"I *know* they're here," the director said, looking at them excitedly. "They've infiltrated this station and are using it as a base of operations! They have a secret laboratory where they are manufacturing trillions of tiny nanobots. Once they finish their evil work they are going to release them in swarms on the helpless planet below, where they will multiply in the oceans and then boil them away! We'll all die and the planet will be ruined!"

Zip was speechless, but Joe was not. "Have you considered evicting the Xenobots?" he asked. "That's got to be a violation of their renter's agreement."

Alfred Nelson continued on ranting without missing a beat. "I tell you I've got Xenobots on this station, and you've got to get rid of them," he said, pointing his finger right at Mark. "They've been wrecking havoc with my station. Do you realize that this station has started *singing?*"

"Singing?" Mark asked in surprise.

"Yes, singing," the director insisted. "Late at night I'll hear it over the intercom: someone is singing *Away Down Yonder with Davy Jones*. It's terrible – the words are right, but it's off-key. I don't know where it's coming from; no one can pin it down. Just ask anybody. We keep hearing

distant rumblings that don't seem to have any particular source, and shadowy figures have been spotted in places where they don't belong!

"And that's only the beginning!" he raged. "Hangar doors open and close on their own – which is blasted inconvenient, if you happen to be in them and get sucked out into the void of space. The power keeps fluctuating, as if someone's straining it, and high-security authorization codes just suddenly stop working. *Someone* is messing with this station, and I tell you that Xenobots are behind it! I have proof, young man!"

While the Starmen were standing there astonished, unsure what to say, he pressed a button on his desk and demanded that Dr Daystorm come in. The doctor entered a few minutes later, carrying a heavy metal briefcase. When the director saw it he pointed to it. "That," he told the incredulous Starmen, "is our proof."

"What's in it?" Zip asked Dr Daystorm. He set the locked steel case on the director's desk. "Something amazing – something we found just this morning. You'll never believe it: *self-replicating nanobots*."

"That's astonishing," Zip said. "Starlight Enterprise has been working on that technology for fifty years and has never perfected it. I had no idea that such a thing existed."

"I'm telling you," the director said – and then the lights went out. All sound ceased, and it became dark – *very* dark.

Chapter 4

"Um." Joe said, after a minute had passed by. "Shouldn't the emergency lights have come on by now?"

"Yes, definitely," Dr Daystorm replied. "I can't imagine why they haven't."

"It's Xenobots," Mr. Nelson muttered quietly. "I just know it."

"We'll take it from here," Zip reassured him, and then turned to his fellow Starmen. He took out his compad and activated its flashlight component – a small, ultra-bright LED that could last indefinitely. Mark and Joe activated theirs as well, and after taking a brief look around they turned their attention to the door.

Mark tried to open it but it refused to open. "Electric doors," he muttered. "Aren't these supposed to have a fail-safe in the event of a power outage?" He called Zip over, and the two of them, with their combined strength, were able to force it open with some effort. After bidding Alfred Nelson to be careful the three of them raced out of the office and into the hallway.

"Let's go to the power plant," Zip said. "I think it's down below – we passed it on the trip to the office."

"Good thinking," Mark said. "If there's a base-wide electrical problem then the root cause can probably be found there."

"And if there are any Xenobots there," Joe said, "we can take 'em on in hand-to-hand combat. I don't suppose you brought along any weapons, did you, Zip?"

Zip stopped, suddenly realizing that they were unarmed. "I know there were some in the *Red Tiger* but I didn't bring them with me. We probably should have, come to think of it, but we were in such a hurry to get to the director..."

"C'mon," Joe urged. "I, personally, will be surprised if the problem turns out to be anything larger than a mouse." The three Starmen raced down the hallway, deftly threading their way through the restless, lost mob that roamed the pitch-black hallways. Here and there the Starmen saw a few flashlights bob in the distance.

In less than three minutes the Starmen found themselves in the power plant, which was a hive of activity. Technicians were running everywhere, working with various stubborn pieces of equipment, and an energetic man, answering to the name of Brown, was barking out orders left and right. Zip noticed that the room was being lit by what looked like a few strategically-placed flashlights. Evidently, he thought, the emergency lighting system was not working here either.

"That's odd," Mark suddenly said. "If we don't have any power then why do we have gravity? Doesn't the artificial gravity grid draw a lot of power?"

"It certainly does," the one called Brown replied. "We haven't lost all power; the life support systems – of which the gravity grid is a part – are still up and running. It's only

everything else that is down, and we don't really know why." He turned to give an order, and Mark suddenly realized that he wasn't talking to people – he was talking to *machines*.

All over the place were little short, squat machines, about two feet high. As Brown directed orders to them they roamed the plant and performed tests: some opened cases, some checked wiring, and some tinkered with various pieces of circuitry. Brown noticed the surprised look on their face.

"They're drones," he said, "the very latest in robotic technology. They don't really have any more brains than a pea, actually, but they can follow orders and they're handy in a tight spot."

"I had no idea," Zip said. "When did you get these? I've never seen this type of robot before."

"We got 'em three weeks ago. We're modernizing here – moving with the times – I'm sure you understand. They're highly useful – inside, outside, repairs, lifting, you name it. The central computer system gives 'em orders; when something needs to be done it tells the drones and they make it happen. All they need is an order; they can carry it out on their own. Huge improvement over using trained monkeys."

"Hey!" an insulted voice called out from the back of the room.

Another man in blue overalls, with the logo of an ioneer on his sleeve, ran over to Brown. "I think I've found the problem, sir. It seems that a huge power surge a few minutes ago blew a fuse. The fuse it blew was faulty, though, and allowed some of the current to flow into the central

computer's data core, which corrupted it. Since the data core is corrupted the computer is not working and the power plant shut down."

"Then fix it!" Brown barked. "Let's get these lights on."

"It's not that easy," the ioneer replied. "Sure, we can replace the fuse – we have them in stock, you know – but the data core has been corrupted. If we replace the fuse the lights will stay off because the computer that runs everything won't start with a corrupted data core. The core has got to be fixed."

"No problem," Brown said. He turned to a nearby drone. "Hey – GR9104. Go extract the data core, bring it to the lab, and see that it's repaired." The drone acknowledged the command by repeating it to him and then scurried off. Zip watched it roll over to an imposing computer that was against the far wall and unscrew an access panel; once it was open it extended a mechanical arm inside the unit, gripped something, and then pulled out the data core– a small cylindrical device roughly three inches in diameter and six inches high. Zip knew that that particular data core could house entire petabytes of information; fixing it would be no easy task. The drone deftly placed it inside a padded steel cylinder that was a little larger than a thermos, brought it inside its chest and secured it, and then scurried outside.

Satisfied, Brown had turned back to the ioneer. "While it's doing that, you find a way to get the lights back on – it's dark in here – and then track down the source of the power surge.

We've been having power problems all month now, and – "

Mark watched the drone leave the room and head down the hallway, and then suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute," he said, addressing Brown. "Where is your data repair center?"

"Upstairs," Brown said, irritated that he had been interrupted. "Why?"

"Because the drone is headed downstairs," Mark replied patiently. "Do you have a spare data core or something?"

Brown's eyes got wide and he rushed outside, the ioneer following close on his heels. He was just in time to see the drone, far below, open a hangar door and roll inside. "After him!" he shouted, purple with rage. "If we don't get that data core back and repaired in four hours we'll have to abandon the station! *Go get him!*"

Even as he gave the order they could hear the airlock door in the hangar below open into space and the noise of a ship leaving the hangar.

Chapter 5

"Oh boy," Joe muttered, as the Starmen raced back to the *Red Tiger*. "This day just keeps getting stranger."

"I don't understand it," Mark said thoughtfully. "Why would the drone ignore a

direct order and evacuate the space station with the data core? It doesn't make any sense."

"All I know," Zip said, "is that if we don't catch him we're going to have a huge problem on our hands. I don't even want to *think* about what evacuating this station would mean."

The three Starmen weaved their way through the pandemonium inside the darkened space station and made it to their hangar.

"Of all the rotten luck," Joe said as they boarded their shuttle and prepared to leave. "Do you realize that if the hangars were without power the drone would never have been able to leave? And just how are we supposed to find the drone once we get into space, anyway?"

"We'll just have to do the best we can," Zip said.

Joe sent the signal to open the hangar doors. Once they opened he blasted the shuttle into space, and then had to immediately slow it down.

"Watch it!" Mark yelled, as a massive space freighter loomed their way. Joe turned the shuttle away just in time and desperately tried to cut down his speed.

"What a mess!" he muttered as his hands worked the controls. "Everyone depends on the space station for flight control information. Now that nobody has it everyone is flying blind. It's all I can do to keep from hitting something." Joe carefully weaved the ship through the massive traffic jam. He was a good enough pilot to avoid collisions but they weren't making very good time.

"Of course," Joe said after a brief pause, "we

still have our original problem. How are we going to find out what ship the drone took?"

"Call up the space station and ask them," Zip said. "Even if their computers are down there has to be someone there who knows what ship was in that hangar. Once we know its transponder number we should be able to track it."

While Joe tried to keep the ship from being destroyed in a collision Mark attempted to raise the station. Several minutes went by before he was able to get someone to answer his call, and it was ten minutes after that before Mark was finally given the information he wanted.

"This is the one you want to track," Mark said as he typed some information into the shuttle's console. "It's not a very fast ship so we should be able to catch up with it." The computer recognized the tracking information and brought it up on their overhead display.

By this time Joe had piloted the *Red Tiger* beyond the immediate vicinity of L5. He looked at the dot on his overhead display and plotted its course. "It appears to be headed for Earth," he said after a few minutes. "If he keeps on his current course he's going to land somewhere on the East Coast of the United States."

"Can you arrange to be there when the ship lands?" Zip asked.

"I think so," Joe said. "He's gotten a good head-start but we should be able to make up the time." Joe entered an intercept course into the ship's computer and then settled back into his chair.

"We really should call Richard," Zip said.

"I'm sure he's got to be wondering what is going on and we did promise to let him know as soon as we knew something."

"*Do* we know what is going on?" Mark asked. "What are you going to tell him?"

"Well," Joe said, "we can always tell him that Xenobots have invaded the L5 space station and are trying to destroy the Earth's oceans, and that we've got to stop them before it's too late!"

"Uh-huh," Zip said skeptically. "What about the drone?"

"It could be a part of their evil plot!" Joe said, warming to the idea. "They're forcing everyone to evacuate the base so that they can have it all to themselves."

"Or not," Zip replied.

"Or not," Joe agreed.

"I think the problem is tied to their new drone system," Mark said thoughtfully. "Maybe the addition of the drones hasn't gone as well as they thought, and the computer has been doing strange things because it just can't handle them. The fact that the drone just headed off into space after being told to repair the data core sounds like a piece of defective equipment to me. That could explain the whole mess."

"Sounds good," Zip said. "Let's contact Richard and fill him in. If we can't retrieve the data core in time then I'm sure SE's help will be needed to evacuate the station."

"We'll get back," Joe said confidently. "After all, what could happen?"

*   *   *   *

Fifty minutes after leaving L5 Joe Taylor landed the *Red Tiger* in a small, grassy field. The drone had chosen a small town on the eastern shore of New Jersey as its landing site and Joe arranged for them to be there well before the drone touched down.

"We should have no trouble intercepting the drone and retrieving the data core," Zip remarked as they stepped out of the shuttle.

"We just have to make sure we don't damage it any further when we're retrieving it," Mark warned.

"We don't want to make things even worse than they already are. We only have three hours before the station has to be evacuated, you know."

"Hey there!" someone behind them shouted. They turned around and saw an agitated old man hurrying their way. "What do you think you're doing there, landing this flying piece of junk in my field?" he asked, brandishing his cane at them.

Zip took a step backwards, surprised. "It's an emergency," he said. "A robot has stolen the data core from the L5 space station, and we need to retrieve it before the whole station has to be evacuated. We don't have much time."

"A likely story!" he roared. "Runaway robot indeed. Do you guys think you're Starmen or something? Now you listen here: you get that ship out of my field or I'll have you all arrested for trespassing and vandalism!"

In the distance, the Starmen saw the ship

they had been tracking make a low pass over the city. It was coming in for a landing. Zip realized that the Starmen didn't have any time to waste if they wanted to catch it before it escaped again.

"I'm sorry," Zip said, "but we don't have the time to move the ship right now! We've got to go, but we'll remove the ship as soon as we can."

"You bet you will!" the old man yelled as the Starmen ran off into the distance. He picked up his cell phone and began making calls. "Young people these days," he muttered. "What's the world coming to?"

*   *   *   *

The three Starmen raced down the street, heading roughly in the direction where they saw the drone's ship land.

"I thought he was going to land nearby," Mark said.

"I guess he changed his mind," Joe replied. "I sure wish we had brought our red Starman suits. Zip, are you sure that there weren't any in the shuttle?"

"Definitely," Zip said. "I wasn't exactly planning on making a trip to Earth today."

Joe took out his compad and activated its tracking function. He soon found the drone's shuttle – a half-mile away. "We'd better hurry," Joe said. "If it gets out of sight we'll never find it."

The Starmen were able to reach the site within five minutes but found it abandoned. A quick search of the ship turned up nothing. Small tire tracks led from the ship to the road but after

that there was no further sign.

"So, what do we do now?" Zip asked.

"I can't get a fix on the droid on my compad," Joe said sadly. "It's a small metal object and there are all kinds of those around here."

"It's got to be around here somewhere," Mark said. "Maybe someone saw it go by."

"I suppose we could start asking around," Zip replied. "Which way should we go?"

Joe thought a moment. "Well, the tracks lead to the road, and there's only one road around here. We took the same road here and it didn't pass us, so it must have gone the other way."

"Sounds good," Zip said. "Let's get going."

As the Starmen jogged down the road they saw a red-haired lad coming toward them, riding on a bicycle.

"Hey there!" Joe called out. "You haven't passed any robots, have you?"

The lad eyed them curiously, said nothing, and pedaled harder. He was soon out of sight.

"He ignored me!" Joe said indignantly.

"Maybe he thought you were crazy," Mark said helpfully. "How many people do you think come out this way looking for runaway robots?"

"Thousands, I bet," Joe replied. "Maybe this is where the drone came from. Maybe this is its long-lost home. Maybe it's returning to the halls of its ancestors."

"There just doesn't appear to be anything out here at all," Zip said. "We've jogged for nearly ten minutes and haven't seen anything but countryside. Does anyone even live out here?"

After a few more minutes they came upon a

small country village. The Starmen saw a handful of old houses, a few run-down stores, and a decrepit train station. A few people were milling around, going about their business.

"Excuse me, miss," Mark said to one lady who had just stepped out of a nearby store with a package in her arms. "Have you seen any robots walk this way?"

The lady eyed him oddly. "No, young man, I have not, nor have I seen any elves or dwarves. If I do, though, you'll be the first to now." With that, she hurried off down the street.

"This is *not* going well," Joe remarked, after that same question elicited similar responses from everyone else in sight. "You'd think they'd never seen a runaway robot before."

"Let's try the train station," Zip said. "Maybe the drone's on his way somewhere else."

"They why not fly there?" Joe asked reasonably. "Why stop here and then take the train to his final destination?"

"Maybe you can't fly to where he is going," Zip said mysteriously.

* * * *

The tiny train station was composed of a single wooden building that sat beside a high-speed railway. "I bet not many trains stop at this station," Mark said. "This doesn't look like a major metropolitan area to me."

To their surprise, as they stepped onto the platform they saw that there was already a small high-speed train sitting at the station. "Look!"

Joe shouted, pointing. The three of them just caught a glimpse of the drone boarding the train!

The three Starmen raced after it, only to be stopped at the door of the train by a conductor. "Tickets, please," he said.

"It's an emergency!" Zip said. "A robot just boarded that train with a data core that it stole from the L5 space station an hour ago. We've got to recover it before the station has to be evacuated! We don't want to ride the train – we just want to get our robot back!"

"Tickets, please" the conductor said calmly.

"A *robot* just boarded your train," Joe said in a strained voice. "Didn't you notice?"

"The robot had a ticket," the conductor said, "which is something you seem to lack."

"It's an *emergency*," Joe repeated.

"It always is," the conductor said calmly.

Zip sighed. "Just go buy three tickets," he told Joe, "and hurry."

* * * *

Joe sped off to the ticket booth in a sprint and was thankful (though not surprised) that there was no one in line.

"I'd like three tickets," he told the lady inside the ticket booth.

"Where would you like to go?" she asked him.

"I don't care. I just want three tickets for that train that's about to leave any second with a robot on board."

"I'm sorry, but I can't give you three tickets with no destination. You have to tell me where

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you want to go."

Joe sighed. "Fine. Give us three tickets to the Aquapolis."

The lady typed at her computer for a minute. "I'm sorry, but this train doesn't go there. The nearest train that stops at the Aquapolis is 40 miles from here."

"Oh. So where *does* this train go?"

"Just about anywhere. I don't know exactly; I've never taken it."

"Ok," Joe said slowly, then he got an idea. "A few minutes ago a robot purchased a ticket from this ticket booth. Where did it want to go?"

"I have no idea. I didn't see any robots. They don't often take this train."

Joe noticed that two people were now in line behind him. "What is the name of this town?"

"Sharps Chapel," she replied.

"Ok, I'll take three tickets to Sharps Chapel. Can you do that?"

"I suppose," she said, surprised. She typed away at her computer. "Ok, that will be $89.72."

Joe opened up his wallet and took out his SmartCard. "Here," he said, handing it to her.

"I'm sorry, but we only take cash."

"Cash!" Joe said, surprised. "Do they still have that?"

"The sign says cash only," the lady said, pointing to a faded, illegible sign that was posted on the ticket window. "That will be $89.72."

The line behind Joe had grown larger and the people were starting to grumble. "Are you going to pay the lady or not?" the person directly behind him said. "We don't have all day!"

"ZIP!" Joe yelled.

Zip came sprinting over. "The train is about to leave!" Zip said. "What's taking so long?"

"We have fallen among philistines who will only accept cash. You don't happen to have $89.72 on you, do you?"

Zip shook his head, took out his wallet, and handed a $100 bill to the ticket master without saying a word. She calmly took it, gave Zip his change, and handed him his tickets. "Enjoy your trip. Next!"

Zip and Joe sprinted over to the conductor. "Sharps Chapel!" Zip said in surprise, looking at the destination printed on his tickets. "Where's that?"

Joe sighed. "Don't ask."

Zip handed the tickets to the conductor and then the three of them boarded the train. The conductor gave out one final "All aboard!" and then the train began to pull out from the station.

Chapter 6

After stepping inside the train the three Starmen took a quick look around. They were in a sleek high-speed train that was divided into six compartments. Each compartment had 24 booths, with 12 on the left and 12 on the right. The booths were divided into pairs that faced each other, and each one could sit two people.

"I don't see him," Zip said as he briefly scanned the people inside. This compartment was roughly half full.

"Neither do I," Mark replied. "He must have gone to another compartment."

A conductor came by. "Please sit down. No one is allowed to be standing up while the train is en route."

The three Starmen sat down in a nearby booth. "Where is this train going?" Joe asked.

The conductor looked at him in surprise. "To New Spindrift, of course," he said, referring to the giant floating city off the coast of New Jersey. "This train reaches a top speed of 475 miles per hour, so we should reach it in precisely 32 minutes."

"That explains it," Zip said after the conductor walked by. "The drone couldn't land there so he landed at the nearest town and took the train the rest of the route."

"Wonderful," Joe said. "It's amazing what robots can do these days."

Mark had his compad out and was studying it intently. "I think the droid is in the next," he said. "I'm picking up some energy signatures from that cabin that correspond to a nuclear power source. I can't be sure, but that would be my guess."

Zip nodded. Calling over the conductor, he asked if they could move to the compartment up ahead.

"That's the first-class cabin," the conductor told him. "Do you have first-class tickets?"

Zip took them out and looked at them again. "Um, no," he said.

"Then I guess you can't."

"I don't suppose," began Joe, "it would help if we told you that we were after a runaway robot who had stolen a data core from the L5 space station, and that if we don't retrieve it soon the space station will have to be abandoned."

"Nope. That is a new one, though! Never heard that excuse before." The conductor calmly went back to his post, leaving the Starmen sitting there.

"Next time," Zip said grimly, "we *are* going to bring our Starman uniforms with us, even if it means going all the way back home to get them. This is ridiculous."

"Well," Mark said reasonably, "it looks as if the drone is headed toward New Spindrift. We're over the ocean now," he said, pointing outside the window, "and the drone can hardly leave the train while en-route. We know where he is, so we can just wait until he gets there and then make our move."

"I've got an even better idea," Zip said. "Let's call Richard and tell him what happened, and see if he can arrange to have the drone met with a reception committee when it arrives. I'm sure that Starlight Enterprise has a significant presence on New Spindrift – it's mainly a research facility, isn't it?"

He got out his compad and dialed Richard's number. Since he was located on the moon and they were on Earth there was a three-second delay on each end of their conversation.

Zip explained the situation to Richard and asked him how things were going on L5. "They

haven't gotten any better since you left 90 minutes ago," he said grimly. "If you don't recover that data core in time the station will have to be evacuated. I'll arrange for some of our personnel to be there when the train arrives. It should not be difficult to intercept an unarmed drone. I only hope that it hasn't damaged the core any further."

Zip signed off. Directly across the aisle a little four-year-old girl was staring at them, wide-eyed. She turned to her mother and said "Look, mommy! Those people think they are *spies*!" The mother hushed her child and picked her up, then turned away from the Starmen and stared out the window.

* * * *

"Twenty more minutes," Mark said, "until the train arrives. We can wait that long. I'm sure that Richard will have a group awaiting its arrival. Our part, gentlemen, is done."

"Unless the drone tries to escape," Zip warned. "It's done a pretty good job of that already. And we *still* don't know what is going on up at L5. For all we know there really may *be* Xenobots involved."

"Or their mothers," Joe remarked.

There was nothing for them to do but wait, so wait they did. After what seemed like an eternity the train pulled into the station.

"Let's go!" Zip said, jumping up to his feet – but it was already too late. A large crowd had formed as soon as the train started pulling in, and

try as they might they could not fight their way through it. The compartment had two exits and both were blocked: one by a man struggling with his luggage, and the other by a very large lady who was talking in a loud voice to her friend about how *awful* these trains were and how *pushy* everyone was and how things were so much *better* on other lines. They seemed content to just stand there and discuss the situation, while the people behind them grew impatient.

The Starmen tried to push their way through the crowd but all they got were some dirty looks from their fellow passengers.

"The windows?" Zip asked his friends.

"Sealed," Mark said.

Zip sighed.

When they finally made it outside the train they began looking around. "Look!" Zip shouted, pointing. Over in the distance, emerging from the front compartment, was the drone that they were seeking.

"And look over there!" Joe replied, pointing in the opposite direction. Approaching the drone was a group of men, but they were definitely not from Starlight Enterprise.

Chapter 7

"Oh boy," Joe said. "Just where is the cavalry when you need them, anyway?"

The three Starmen raced toward the drone, but they knew that they were too far away: by the time they got there it would be too late. Sure enough, the men closed in on the drone – but as they got close the drone flew over their heads and soared into the distance.

The Starmen stopped in their tracks. "Woah!" Joe said. "I don't remember anyone telling us that those machines could fly."

"Wonderful," Zip said, "just wonderful. *Now* what are we going to do?"

"Um, probably get involved in a fight," Joe replied, observing that the men who had tried to stop the drone had noticed the three Starmen and were headed their way, looking none-too-pleased. "What do you say you let me take all four of them at once, Zip, just to make it fair?"

"I don't think so," Mark said, shaking his head. "The middle two are mine – you can have the others."

Thirty seconds later the fight ended with their four attackers lying on the ground, moaning in pain. Just as the fight ended the Starmen noticed a group of three officers running toward them, accompanied by several Starlight Enterprise personnel.

"I'm sorry we were late," one of the officers told Zip, "but it took us longer than we thought to get to the station."

"That's ok," Zip said. "Can you take custody of these men? They tried to grab the drone right after it got off the train, and when it flew off into the distance they turned and attacked us."

The officers helped the injured men off the

ground and arrested them. "Ok, let's hear it: what were you doing here?" But they refused to talk. They led them away, leaving the Starmen with the four personnel from Starlight Enterprise.

"We know the drone is here somewhere," Zip said, "we just don't know where. It couldn't have gone far. Do you have a way to search the station?"

"I think so," one of the personnel said. "We should be able to track it by its energy signature. That particular model uses a special nuclear power source that can be tracked from a distance with the right equipment."

Using a special tracking device that the Starlight Enterprise personnel had brought, the Starmen were able to pinpoint the machine on the island. It had apparently taken refuge inside a large building a short walk away. "Very nice," Zip commented. "Remind me to ask Richard to start building those into our compads."

"Don't forget the popcorn maker, too," Joe said. "I've been wanting that for years."

The three Starmen and the four Starlight Enterprise personnel raced toward the location specified on the tracking device. "It doesn't seem to be moving," Mark noticed. "I wonder what it's doing."

"Should we call in any backup units?" a technician named Bradley asked. "We have some on standby in the case of an emergency."

"Not yet," Zip said. "Let's see what is going on first. If trouble breaks out then we'll call them in."

In less than five minutes the group found themselves in front of a large glass building.

"Cyragon Data Services, LTD," Mark said aloud, reading a large sign posted on the building's front lawn. "I've never heard of them before."

"Let's go!" Zip yelled, sprinting across the lawn toward the building's entrance. The entire group charged inside, bursting into the lobby. They raced past the startled secretary in the outer office and ran down a long hallway.

"Which way?" Zip said.

"Down here," a Starlight technician replied, examining the tracking device, "and to the left – no, to the right," he said. "It looks like the drone is in a big room at the end of the hallway."

"Got it," Zip said. Within seconds the entire group had burst into that room. Inside they saw what looked like a large laboratory; parts and equipment were strewn everywhere, and technicians in lab coats were scattered around the room. To one corner Zip spied the drone they had been looking for, standing motionless.

The Starmen's noisy entrance into the room startled all of the workers in the laboratory. All of them, in unison, turned around to see what had caused the commotion. One of them stepped forward to greet them.

"Hello gentlemen," he said, stepping forward to extend a hand. "I'm Dr. Lowery, the head of the data retrieval department. How can I help you?"

Zip pointed at the drone. "We've come to get him. Do you know what he's doing here?"

"Ah, you must be from L5! Don't worry - we'll be done in just a minute," Dr. Lowery assured him. "This data core has been badly damaged but

I think we can transfer its data to a new unit. Give us another fifteen minutes and we should be good to go."

"The data core?" Joe asked.

"Why, yes! This is where that data core was first designed. It's pretty badly damaged, but we have a lot of experience in removing data from damaged data cores. This particular core is actually so old that we're probably the only laboratory in the world that can do the job. We'll have it transferred in a few minutes and then you should be good to go."

"Ah," Zip said. "Thanks. We'll get out of your way, then."

The three Starmen left the room and headed outside.

"Do you need anything else?" Bradley asked.

"No, but thank you," Zip said. "I think we can handle it from here."

As the four Starlight Enterprise personnel walked away the three Starmen looked at each other. "So, the drone was told to go fix the data core - ", Zip began.

"- and did exactly that," Joe responded.

"Yup," said Mark.

There was silence. "I guess we wait," Zip said.

"I guess so," Joe replied.

Fifteen minutes later Zip, Mark, Joe, and the drone were all riding together on a high-speed train, bound for Sharps Chapel, New Jersey. None of them had very much to say.

*   *   *   *

Three hours after leaving the L5 space station Zip, Mark, Joe, and the drone docked once again in the L5 space station. The three Starmen had to fly with the drone because their shuttle, the *Red Tiger*, had been impounded by the police and was no longer parked in the field.

The pandemonium inside L5 was not nearly as bad as it had been when they left. They had contacted the station while en-route to let them know that they would be back in time, and the crowds became calmer after the emergency lighting had been restored and after they were told that things would be back to normal shortly. The three Starmen followed the drone from the hangar to the power plant, where it placed the repaired data core back into the central computing unit. Within minutes the main lights came back on and the station was back to normal.

Once the lights came back on the Starmen walked upstairs to Alfred Nelson's office to let him know what had happened. When they arrived at his office they saw that he was now a very happy man.

"The police called after you left New Spindrift," he told the Starmen. "The men they arrested have began to talk."

"That's great!" Zip replied. "What did they have to say?"

"Oh, they said quite enough. It turns out that they were part of a small startup company that had taken residence aboard this station. They were conducting secret nanobot experiments, trying to build self-replicating machines. They didn't have much money so they decided to hack

their way into the power supply of the base to avoid running up a huge electrical bill. They also tried to tap directly into the processing unit of this base to avoid paying computer time fees."

"Ah," Joe said.

"The problem is that they didn't do a very good job. Their hacks caused all kinds of problems; the computer started doing weird things, and they drew so much power that the plant blew a fuse and shorted out the data core. They *will* be properly punished," the director said firmly. "I'll have none of that on board this station! I'm going to seriously improve the security around here."

"Sounds good," Zip said. "Did they say what they were doing on New Spindrift?"

"Oh yes!" he replied. "They realized right away what had happened to the space station, and they went to New Spindrift to see if they could expedite the repair process. They arrived shortly before you did, as a matter of fact. When they saw you approaching the drone they thought that you were trying to interfere with it and they attacked you in order to protect it."

After making sure that there was nothing else they could do, the three Starmen walked back toward their hangar, where they boarded a Starlight Enterprise shuttle. Joe guided the ship out of the hangar into space and then set it on a course that would lead back to Amundsen City.

"So," Zip said after Joe set the ship on auto-pilot, "what did we accomplish this afternoon?"

"Why, obviously, we saved the L5 space station from a horde of angry Xenobots intent on

taking it over," Joe replied.

"Sounds good to me," Mark said. And that was all they said until they were back on the Moon.

THE ULTIMATE CODE

"Now let me get this straight," Mark was saying. "We're supposed to rendezvous with the Ahmanyans where, exactly?"

Starmen Mark Seaton, Zip Foster, and Joe Taylor were sitting in a private conference room in the famous Starlight Tower on the Moon. Papers were strewn all over the mahogany table that was in the center of the room, and a large map of Europa was projected onto one wall. The oblong table was surrounded by six chairs, but the three Starmen were the only ones present. They had been discussing the final preparations for their return to Europa for several hours now.

"We're supposed to meet Stenafi, Saadervo, and Stavri on a pocket world in the asteroid belt," Zip said. "I don't think the asteroid has a name or anything, but we have been given its expected location on the date of our rendezvous. The Ahmanyans have also promised to put a locator beacon on the asteroid to make it easier to find."

Joe lifted a stack of papers off the table and shuffled through them. "I've got the coordinates right here," he said. "I'll program them into the *Bonny Swan* after we've left lunar orbit. October 15, 2153 is our launch date."

"Which is exactly nineteen days from now," Zip said. "I think we all understand how the mission is going to work and what we're going there to accomplish. Does – "

The phone rang, interrupting Zip's train of thought. After checking the name to see who was calling, Joe reached over and pressed a button on

the conference table. The projected map of Europa disappeared and was replaced with the image of Richard Starlight, the CEO of Starlight Enterprise.

"How are things going?" Richard asked. From what the Starmen could see he appeared to be sitting in his private office. "I'm sorry to interrupt you."

"Very well, sir," Zip said. "We were just wrapping up our discussion. How can I help you?"

Richard leaned forward in his chair. "A few minutes ago I received an urgent message from Alfred Nelson," he began.

Looks of intense dismay appeared on the faces of all three Starmen. "Oh, please, no," Joe groaned.

Alfred Nelson managed the L5 space station, which was the largest space station in the Solar System. A few weeks ago the three Starmen had been called out to L5 at Alfred's request to investigate a problem, and the memory of that experience was still fresh in their minds.

"Please tell me he just called to say that everything was fine," Zip said. "He can't be having more problems."

Richard shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Zip. He called to ask for help, and he specifically requested that I send you three to resolve the matter."

"Isn't there someone else that you could send?" Zip asked. "The last time we went out there – "

"I know, Zip, but this is different. Alfred has

received what he thinks is a distress call from a spaceship in the outer planets, and he wants some help decoding the message and responding to it. I'm sure it's nothing that you can't handle."

Zip sighed and looked at Joe and Mark. The mere mention of Alfred Nelson's name had cast a gloom over the entire room. No one was looking forward to making a return trip to L5.

"Ok," Zip said. "We'll go."

The trip to L5 was uneventful. Like last time, Richard had the *Red Dragon* waiting for them at the Amundsen City spaceport, and Joe piloted it to the L5 space station. The Starmen said very little on the trip there.

Mark was the first one to break the silence. "At least we have our uniforms with us this time," he said.

"And cash," Joe replied.

Zip shook his head. "I'm sure things will go just fine. Now that we've dealt with Alfred before we know what to expect. This time will be different."

"I sure hope so," Joe said. "Last time we almost got arrested, our ship was impounded, and we nearly made the news. It took Richard Starlight two weeks to get the mess straightened out."

"Come on," Zip said. "We've battled aliens on the planet Nyx. We've survived being torpedoed in the oceans of Europa. We escaped destruction in the skies of Mars. You can't tell me that you're intimidated by Alfred Nelson."

"They're probably still talking about us at

that tiny seaside town," Joe mused. "I bet we'll go down in history."

"I'm sure you're right, Zip," Mark said. "But, all the same, if another robot takes over a spaceship and escapes, *you* can go and follow him. I'm going to stay home and keep out of trouble."

No one said anything else for another twenty minutes, when the L5 space station at last came within visual range. Joe contacted the space station's flight control center, which then automatically took control of the *Red Dragon* and brought it into a hangar.

As soon as the ship landed Joe peered out the cockpit window. "Haven't we seen those people before?" he asked, gesturing toward the three armed guards that were waiting by the wall.

"I think so," Mark said. "Aren't they the same ones – "

"Yup," Zip said.

The three Starmen disembarked from their ship. One of the armed guards stepped forward to greet them. "Mr. Howard, Fine, and Howard at your service," he said. "It's good to see you again. Right this way, please." One of the guards opened a door that led inside the station and the three Starmen stepped through it.

The guards escorted the Starmen down the hall and through the station. The inside lighting was set to simulate a pleasant mid-afternoon; the wide hallways were gently lit, and trees and shrubs were strategically placed. A few people that were going about their daily business stopped and stared at the Starmen as they walked

by.

"I'm telling you," Joe said as they followed their armed escort down the hallway, "the uniform makes all the difference. Why, if we had had our uniforms with us last time – "

Zip shook his head. "We would have caught the probe right away, Joe, and brought it back to the station, only to find out that the hapless drone was just trying to repair the data core. We would have then made *another* trip to Earth, but given the delay we would have come back from Dr. Lowery too late to save the largest space station in existence from having to be completely shut down. Our pictures would have still been in the paper weeks later, and we would have gone down in history as the most inept Starmen of all time."

"That would have been a great day to have overslept," Joe said. "There's a lot to be slept for strategic, targeted napping. It's really a lost art."

The group stopped at an elevator, and proceeded to take it fifteen stories up to the top of the station. The elevator was made of glass and was located in the outside wall of the station, offering its occupants a beautiful view of the bustle of traffic outside. A host of ships, old and new, was flying to their various destinations.

Ten minutes after their arrival the Starmen found themselves walking into a conference room. "The Thomas Starlight Conference Room," Mark said aloud, reading the sign on the door. "Very nice."

The room was elaborately furnished. A wide, rectangular table was in the center of the room; it

was made of a beautiful dark wood and trimmed in gold. The walls were decorated with famous paintings depicting scenes from deep space, and one entire wall of the conference room was a window that offered a beautiful view of Earth. Mark could see that it was night-time in North America; the day/night divide was somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. In a few hours daylight would reach the East Coast.

After the Starmen entered the conference room their escorts took up guard outside the door. "Just for security, just for security," Alfred Nolan said, extending them a hand. "I'm pleased to see you! Thank you for coming so quickly."

"You're welcome," Mark said, shaking his hand. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Please, take a seat," Alfred responded. "This is Matthew Lewis and this is Vanessa Sloan," he said, gesturing toward two people that were seated at the table. As he introduced them they rose and shook the Starmen's hands. "Matthew and Vanessa are our two top cryptographic experts at L5."

"Cryptographic experts?" Joe asked, as the Starmen took a seat. "I didn't realize that L5 was involved in cryptography."

"We're involved in all sorts of things, young man," the director replied. "There's no more important space station in all of the solar system than this one right here! We've got departments in every field – biology, physics, chemistry, cooking, the works. Our supercomputer is one of the biggest in existence, and it's used all the time!"

"I know," Zip said. "I'm glad that your computer is behaving itself again."

"Now where was I?" the director mused as he took a seat at the table. "Ah – right. Matthew, you may begin."

Matthew stood up "Four months ago the spaceship *Luna Merchant* set out for the planet Neptune," he began.

"That sounds familiar," Joe said. "Isn't that Dr. Bayard's ship?"

"That is correct," Matthew replied. "Dr. Maxie Bayard was undertaking an expedition to the planet Neptune. He believed that it had been visited by intelligent extraterrestrial beings at some point in the past and hoped that his expedition could uncover further evidence to support that hypothesis."

"I read about that," Mark said. "Neptune really hasn't been the focus of many major expeditions, and Dr. Bayard felt that it had been unduly neglected. I think that Starlight Enterprise was partially funding his voyage and had provided some equipment."

"That is also correct," Matthew replied. "Starlight Enterprise provided Dr. Bayard the funds to purchase the most advanced artificial intelligence system ever made – the TB-9000. His plan was to use it to parse through any readings he took from Neptune for signs of intelligence. He hoped that a computer could spot patterns or signals that would otherwise be – "

"Wonderful," the director said. "Please get to the point, Matthew. We don't have all day, you know."

"Two days ago," Matthew continued, "this station received a message from the *Luna Merchant*. The message was a surprise for three reasons. First, the *Luna Merchant* did not depart from L5. Second, the *Luna Merchant* had barely had time to pass the orbit of Saturn and was not expected to arrive at Neptune for another six months, so no messages were expected. Third, the message was addressed to Melissa Nova – a person who did not live on L5."

The director interrupted. "I found out about this when Cody – that's the young man who delivers the mail on L5 – came into my office and asked to speak with me. He gets misdirected mail all the time, but usually he could just return it to the sender and be done with it. Since the sender was on a space expedition he didn't know what to do, so he came to me."

"I knew immediately that something was up, so I took the message from him and read it. One glance at the message showed that it was a code of some kind, and once I saw that I knew there was trouble. Coded message from deep space! All kinds of terrible things happen out there in deep space, and if the *Luna Merchant* was in trouble we needed to know immediately so we could dispatch a rescue mission. There was no time to waste! I immediately called in my experts and asked them to decrypt it."

"We didn't know what to make of the message at first," Vanessa said. "I loaded the message into the central computer system and tried to decrypt it but made no progress at all. The encryption is very unusual; it doesn't

correspond with anything I have seen in the past. It does not appear to be a substitution cipher. It does not appear to use any modern or ancient encryption algorithm. We may be dealing with an advanced alien technology."

"I don't understand," Zip said. "Dr. Bayard sent an encrypted message to L5, addressed to a non-existent person?"

"That's correct," Matthew said.

"But how do you know that it's an emergency message?"

"Think, man!" Alfred Nolan said. "What else could it be? There they are, billions of miles from the Sun, and suddenly they send an encoded message to us. It must be a cry for help! What if their computer system went haywire? What if they were boarded by aliens? I think they were forced to encode the message to hide it from their attackers. They must have been afraid that their message would be intercepted. It's vital that we find out what is going on!" He gestured over to Vanessa. "Please continue."

"Wait a minute," Joe said. "Have you tried contacting Dr. Bayard and asking him what the message meant?"

"Of course not!" the director said. "Use your head! If they've been boarded by aliens the very last thing we want to do is let the aliens know that we're on to them. We've got to keep this hush-hush until we know what's going on. Now Vanessa – please continue."

"As I was saying," she said, "it didn't take us long to discover that the message was encrypted using a completely new algorithm. Matthew and I

spent hours working on it before we suddenly had an idea.

"It was obvious, based on the message header, that Dr. Bayard had encrypted the message on his own computer before he sent it. He clearly meant for it to be understood. It is highly likely that he would have chosen a technique that would be meaningless to his attackers but easily understood to us at L5. We decided to take a step back and look at the entire message with fresh eyes."

Vanessa stood up and pressed a button on the wall, dimming the lights. "This is the encrypted message that we received," she said, pressing another button on the table.

Instantly a picture appeared floating in mid-air over the conference table. Inside the picture was a note with the following message:

From: Dr. Maxie Bayard
To: Melissa Nova
Timestamp: 09/24/2153 02:08:24 AM MST

x

The three Starmen looked at the note in astonishment. "You mean to tell me that *that* is the message?" Zip asked. "That's it?"

"That's right, young man," the director said. "You can see why it grabbed my attention! You just don't see coded messages from deep space very often. As soon as I saw that I said to myself, Alfred, now there's some trouble, and no mistake."

"When we first saw the message," Matthew said, "we thought that the message had been cut off while in transit. After examining the logs, however, we saw that we had received the full message header and footer bytes; the message was not truncated. This does represent the entire message that was sent from the *Luna Merchant*.

"After we verified that the full message had been received, we suddenly realized where we had made our mistake. The message was encoded using MST – Mountain Standard Time. Bayard lived on the L5 space station before he left for Neptune, and the L5 station uses Greenwich Mean Time. There was no reason for him to use MST unless he was trying to tell us something."

"We knew that MST had to be an acronym for something," Vanessa said. "We entered that phrase into our cryptographic system and tried to determine its meaning. The computer came back with many likely candidates, but one in particular caught our attention: Madison Symmetric Torus."

"What?" Zip asked. "I've never heard of that before."

"It's a type of device that is used in advanced fusion research," Matthew explained. "We thought that Dr. Bayard was trying to refer to nuclear physics – specifically, to nuclear fusion.

We then noticed the time of the message: it was sent at 02:08:24. Two to the third power is eight, and eight times three is twenty-four. It seems unlikely that this was a coincidence; the time is too much like a formula. The solution was obvious: Dr. Bayard was talking about the top-secret formulas for plasma containment in nuclear fusion reactors!"

"Wow," Zip said. "But – "

"I knew right then what had happened," the director said. "Dr. Bayard was trying to warn us that Xenobots were trying to steal his secret formulas for plasma containment! His ship must have been boarded after they crossed the orbit of Saturn and he was hiding out in the ship, trying to tell us before it's too late!"

"What clinches the theory is that the message is addressed to Melissa Nova," Vanessa said. "Stars can go nova under certain conditions, and stars are powered by nuclear fusion. It all ties together."

"Ok," Zip said. "But – "

"The reason I asked you here," the director said, "is because I need your help. If Dr. Bayard's ship has been taken over by hostile aliens then we need to mount a rescue expedition immediately. You three have actually been out in deep space before; there's no reason why you can't leave immediately. I'm sure you could get there in a matter of weeks and send the Xenobots packing. There's no time to waste, young man!"

"There are a few things that need clarification, though," Zip said. "Can I ask the base computer a few questions?" When no one

objected he took out his compad and connected it to a port on the table.

"Computer," he said, addressing his compad. "Has a person by the name of Melissa Nova ever lived on the L5 space station?"

"Affirmative," the computer responded. "Melissa Nova began living on the L5 space station on January 15, 2150. She left L5 on August 15, 2153 when her lease expired."

Joe spoke up. "Was Melissa Nova any relation to Dr. Bayard?"

"Affirmative. She was his younger sister."

"Do you know where Melissa Nova is living now?" Mark asked.

"Negative. She did not leave a forwarding address."

The three Starmen looked at each other. "I think I know what is going on," Joe said. He took a piece of paper out of his pocket, wrote something on it, and handed it to Mark and Zip. They both read it, nodded, and handed it back.

"What's going on?" the director said. "I don't understand."

"The three of us have a theory," Joe said, "but we want to test it first. If you'll give me an envelope I'll place this piece of paper into it and seal it, so that our theory can be preserved for posterity. After that I'd like to make a phone call."

"I don't understand this at all," the director said, as Vanessa searched the room for an envelope. "It's quite obvious! You've got to head out there immediately; there's no telling how much trouble the Xenobots have already unleashed. There must be no delay!"

Vanessa was eventually able to find an envelope; she handed it to Joe, who took his piece of paper and placed it inside. He sealed it, wrote "Confidential" on it, and placed it on the table.

"Computer," Zip said aloud, "I want you to locate Melissa Nova. See if you can find out her current contact information."

"Please wait," the computer replied. The three Starmen waited.

"I really don't see how this will help," Matthew said. "I doubt that Melissa Nova knows very much about cryptographic analysis."

"She may know more than you think," Zip said. "I believe that she alone has the key to this cipher."

It took the computer a few more minutes to locate the phone number, but it was at last obtained.

"Great!" Joe said. "Call her up."

The phone rang three times, and then someone answered. "Hello, this is Melissa."

"Hi there," Joe said. "This is Starman Joe Taylor, calling you from the L5 space station. I have with me David Foster, Mark Seaton, Alfred Nelson, Matthew Lewis, and Vanessa Sloan."

"Wow," she said. "I'm impressed! How can I help you?"

"We've got a question for you," Joe replied. "Two days ago the space station received a message from Dr. Bayard, addressed to you. Since you no longer live at the station the computer could not deliver the message."

"Oh, that's right," Melissa said. "I knew I

forgot something. I'd better let him know that my address has changed."

"The forces of goodness in the universe would greatly appreciate that," Joe said. "Do you think you could do us a favor?"

"Sure," she said. "What do you have in mind?"

"Due to the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the message, it has been classified as an encrypted distress call," Joe said. "A team of cryptologists have been trying to decrypt it for two days now and have had no luck understanding it. We were hoping that you could tell us what it meant."

"That's odd," she said. "I don't think he's ever sent his messages encoded before. In fact, I'd be surprised if he even knew how to do that. But, um, sure, just send it to me and I'll take a look at it."

Joe asked Matthew to send her a copy of the message. He shook his head, but when Joe pressed him he forwarded the note to Melissa. "It's been sent," Joe said, after receiving confirmation of this from Matthew. "You should have it in just a few moments."

"I still can't believe you would read my mail," Melissa said. "Do you do that very often?"

"Fortunately, no," Joe replied. "But in this case we made an exception."

"Ah, there it is," Melissa said. "I see it now. Let me read it." She was silent a moment, and then burst out laughing. The director looked puzzled. "I don't see anything funny about it," he muttered.

"Thanks for sending this message to me," she said. "It made my day. I'll let my brother know that I received it and that my address has changed."

"You're welcome," Joe replied. "Just for the record, what was Dr. Bayard trying to tell you?"

"Oh, well, you have to understand my brother. I saw him just before he left, you know, and told him to send me a letter after he got past the orbit of Saturn. No one in our family had ever gone out that far before, you see. So after he passed the orbit of Saturn, he did just that – he sent me the letter 'x'."

"Wonderful," Zip said. "I'm glad your brother is safe and sound. Thank you for your time."

"You're welcome," Melissa said. "Bye!" She hung up.

Alfred Nelson picked up the sealed envelope off the desk, tore it open, and read the note inside. He then threw it down on the table. "How could you possibly have known?" he asked.

"Call it a lucky guess," Zip said.

"Based on past history," Joe added.

"That's crazy!" the director said, fuming. "How could we be expected to know that? It's not fair!"

"That," Mark said, "is exactly why you're not supposed to read other people's mail."

With that, the three Starmen walked out of the conference room and back down the hall toward their waiting ship.

"And that was the last time that Alfred Nelson ever invited us to L5," Mark said. "He retired a few years after that, and with the onset of the Xenobot War we became involved in other things."

Stenafi laughed. "I am not surprised! Have you ever been back?"

"You know, come to think of it, I don't think so," Mark said. "I've never really had a desire to go back, actually."

Stenafi's laughter had awoken their infant daughter, who began to stir. Stenafi held her close and walked off the porch and onto their front lawn; Mark followed close behind her. A soft wind was blowing, carrying with it the fresh scent of the newly-planted forest that spread out in front of them.

"Did I tell you that I heard from Joe the other day?" Mark asked.

"No, you didn't," Stenafi replied. "How is he doing?"

"He's doing well – as crazy as ever. He only had a few minutes to talk. It seems that he's a part of a major new expedition that Starlight Enterprise is launching. I think he's leading it, as a matter of fact."

"Oh?" she said.

"Yup. It seems that the scientists at SE have been combing through some records left behind by the Lucians, and they've found evidence of the

existence of an entirely new alien race. I think Joe called them the Delians."

"If they are out there, I'm sure he will find them," Stenafi said. "It sounds as if Joe still has many adventures before him."

"I think we both do," Mark said. "Joe's are among the stars; and mine – well, mine are right here, on Ahmanya."

The three of them looked out over the forest, as the last light of the sun began to fade. They watched as the stars came out – thousands of bright pinpoints of light, shining in the darkness, rejoicing.