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opening extract from

Tommy Niner and the Mystery Spaceship

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1 Pots of Trouble

As soon as the cabin door slid open, Tommy Niner realized something was badly wrong. He could tell at a glance that Dad's precious Arcturan Stink Blooms weren't feeling too good.

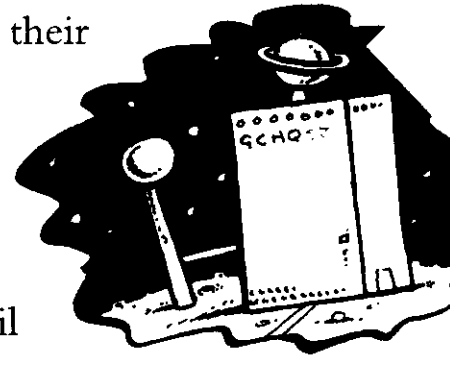
After all, one of Tommy's chores during the past few weeks in space had been to water Commander Niner's rare alien plants every day. So he knew them pretty well.

They usually got excited and waved their purple tendrils around when Tommy came in. But today they drooped, listlessly. The stems were withered, and the petals had gone deathly pale.



Tommy tried to remember if he'd done anything that might have harmed the plants. He didn't think so, but he couldn't be sure. Besides, Dad was often grumpy at the end of a long patrol.

They'd been away from base for ages on their current mission, too. But now the Stardust was heading for Galactic Council



HQ. They aimed to arrive just in time for the annual Space Parade.

Tommy could hardly wait. The whole fleet would be gathering, so he'd be able to see most of his friends. And there was a programme of special events to make it even more fun.

Although *that* was a major part of Tommy's problem.

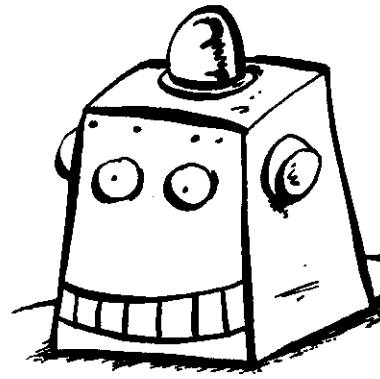
Dad had always wanted to win first prize at the Flower Show. And as no one



had ever managed to grow Arcturan Stink Blooms on a spaceship, he was very confident.

He won't be for much longer, thought Tommy, pressing the intercom switch. He had contemplated keeping quiet about it, but decided that would only make things worse.

"Tommy calling control deck. Come in, Dad. Over."



"I'm afraid your father isn't here at the moment, Tommy," replied Ada, the Stardust's elderly computer. "Can I help?"

"Not unless you're an expert on sick alien flowers. Dad's stupid old pot plants look as if they've had it." There was a silence.

"Ada, did you hear me?"

"I certainly did," said Ada, nervously. "And I think I'd prefer to be left out of this, Tommy. I'll find Commander Niner and send him to you. Over . . . and *out*."

Typical, thought Tommy. Ada might be old, but she wasn't stupid. She knew Dad was bound to be angry, and she didn't want to get caught in any crossfire.

Tommy sighed, and opened a pack of his favourite chewing-gum. He'd nearly run out, but at least he almost had a complete set of the "Space Villains" cards that came with it.

He was reading the latest one when Dad strode into the cabin and went straight over to the Arcturan Stink Blooms. Commander Niner looked so upset Tommy thought he was going to cry.



"Nothing, Dad, honest. I've been watering them just like you told me to, that's all. They were OK yesterday."

"Well, *something* must have happened," said Dad, crossly. "Healthy plants don't start dying for no reason, do they? And stop chewing that ghastly gum!"

Tommy kept his jaw still, but it was no use. Dad seemed to be winding up

to deliver one of his lectures . . . then the last crew member turned up, and Tommy was saved. It was Grandad.

"Hello, you two," he said, happily. "I suppose this means you've already discovered the surprise."

"*What* surprise?" said Tommy and Dad together.

"I injected your plants with a brilliant new fertilizer I invented this morning. It *must* be working by now!"





Tommy looked at Dad. Commander Niner's face went very red. His mouth began moving, but no words emerged. Tommy almost expected to see steam hissing out of his ears and nostrils.

They should have known, of course. You could always trust Grandad to make a mess of things with his mad inventions. They tried to keep him under control, but didn't have much success.

"Is there a problem?" he was saying now, innocently.

"Only a small one," said Tommy. "Your fertilizer is killing Dad's plants, and he's not very happy about it."

"Impossible," said Grandad with a

sniff. "My formula is perfect. I'll bet it's *his* fault. He's never really been any good at that sort of thing. Why, when he was your age . . ."

"Hold me back," interrupted Dad, finding his voice at last. "I think I'm going to strangle him."

Tommy kept the two adults apart, but they still argued above his head. Grandad refused to apologize, which made Dad even more angry. This could go on for ever, thought Tommy.

Just at that moment the intercom bleeped.

"Commander Niner," said Ada,



"Not now, Ada," shouted Dad. He turned back to Grandad. "You've gone too far this time, you old twit . . ."

"But this *is* rather important," said Ada patiently. "I might even go so far as to say it was . . . well, quite urgent."

"I don't care," said Dad. "*You* deal with it, all right? That's what you're there for, isn't it?"

"As you wish, Commander," said Ada, briskly. "Just remember, I did my *best* to warn you."

That sounds ominous, thought Tommy.

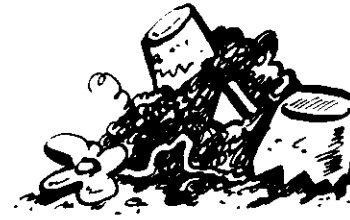
Dad and Grandad started arguing again, but suddenly there was a deafening noise. Tommy recognized it instantly. Ada had fired every single retro-rocket at once.

And that meant she was slamming on the brakes!

The three of them flew forward as the Stardust screeched to a halt. Grandad shot out of the cabin door into the gangway, Dad walloped into the wall, and Tommy landed on top of him.

They lay there stunned for a while, listening to crashes and smashes as loose objects continued to fall throughout the ship. Tommy eventually stood up and helped Dad to his feet.

"My poor Stink Blooms!" moaned Commander Niner. A heap of plants, soil and broken pots lay in a corner. "You'd better have a good explanation for this, Ada. Otherwise I'm going to come up and pull out your plug."



"I did try to warn you," said Ada, snootily. "Next time may I suggest you

pay a little more attention when I'm on the point of announcing an emergency stop?"

"But why did you have to do it, Ada?" said Tommy. "Is there something ahead of us?"

"Er . . . yes and no, Tommy," said Ada.

"What *is* she talking about?" said Dad.

"I think she's gone senile," muttered Grandad.

"You'd know all about *that*, wouldn't you?" snapped Ada.

"You're dead right," said Dad. "Do you know, he . . ."



Tommy had finally lost his temper. The others shut up, although Dad glared at him. "Thank you. Now, Ada, would you like to tell us *exactly* what's out there?"

"I'm sorry, Tommy," said Ada. "But all I know is what my scanners have picked up. It's big, and it's blocking our way. And there's one other thing."

"Yes, Ada?" said Tommy.

"It's . . . invisible."

