
The Possessor Wars

Book 1

**The Boy
Who Fell
into
the Sky**

Chad Spencer

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Part 1

IN A SMALL WORLD

“All moments in time are not created equal. Large events often begin in small, very personal ways. The monumental forces of history often hinge on the individual choices of the people involved. There’s a proverb about the flapping of a butterfly’s wings that sets off a chain of events that causes a hurricane on the other side of the world. So it was with the events that preceded First Contact. The choices made by one, seemingly unimportant boy in the lower reaches of one, seemingly unimportant arcology completely changed our view of both the universe and human race itself.” *First Contact, an Eyewitness Account*, Hugh Benson, p. 14. © 2776 Megalon Interstellar Media, All rights reserved in this and all other universes, parallel or unparallel realities, unrealities, and planes of existence.

A small robot, which was shaped very much like a dog, scanned its surroundings keenly. Hiding under a thick clump of bushes, it was unnoticed by the people strolling along the nearby path. They were too busy enjoying the afternoon sun, which shone brightly through the clear dome hundreds of feet above the park.

The robot, the park, and the dome were on the top of a building that was on the plains of the American Midwest. It was a tall building, standing 3,000 stories high. This building, called an arcology, was cylindrical and a mile wide. It towered above a vast grumbling city that stretched across most of the state.

The building itself was not unusual. Neither was the city around it. For the last 120 years, most states in the U.S. were nearly covered by cities. And most cities had many arcologies just like this one. Each arcology housed millions of people. Every arcology was like a city unto itself, with apartments, schools, stores, recreation centers, and more. This arcology, like all the others, had a huge, clear dome on top. Inside the dome was a park filled with trees, bushes, ponds, streams, and paths. And in this park stood the secretive, dog-like robot.

The dogbot swiveled its ears, which had built-in microphones, in every direction. It peeked out through the bushes, examining its surroundings with its camera eyes. It did not, however, look up. If it had, it would have seen a robot shaped very much like a small monkey lowering itself stealthily from a tree by its tail. Hanging upside down, the monkeybot paused and gazed intently at the dogbot.

Slowly, quietly, the monkeybot moved closer to the dogbot. It was not in a hurry. In its hand-like paws, the monkeybot clutched a Swiss ultra knife, which was a modern version of the Swiss army knives people had used for centuries. When it was close enough to touch the dogbot's back, it opened the knife and took out a power decoupler, the modern equivalent of a screwdriver. Quickly, and very gently, it removed a panel on the dogbot's back. Next, the monkeybot passed the Swiss ultra knife up and gripped it with its left foot, leaving its hands free. With both hands, it lifted the panel and transferred it to its right foot.

Two thousand, one hundred and eighty-three stories below the monkeybot, Jeff Bowman smiled. He peered attentively at the 3D video feed that he was getting on his datapad from the monkeybot's camera eyes. He peeked warily up at his teacher, Sirsen Bering, sitting in the front of the room.

Although Sirsen Bering was looking around at the students in the room, Jeff was pretty sure his teacher didn't notice what he was doing. With 300 students in the class, Sirsen Bering didn't usually focus on an individual student unless that student made either noise or trouble. Jeff made neither.

Looking back at the datapad, Jeff rapidly sent commands to the monkeybot. The datapad, which was a powerful computer that every student carried, was about the size of a large clipboard and just less than an inch thick. It transmitted the Jeff's commands through the building's network, called the grid, to the monkeybot up in the park. Following Jeff's directives, the monkeybot reached into the opening in the dogbot's back. It pulled loose a thin cable.

Jeff glanced quickly over at Dirk Highborne, who sat eighteen rows to his left. Highborne was clearly stunned. After a moment's hesitation, he furiously typed commands into his datapad to try to reconnect to the dogbot. Jeff smiled, knowing it wouldn't do any good now that the dogbot's wireless network antenna was disconnected.

'He'll never control the dogbot again.' Jeff congratulated himself.

Jeff sent a text message to his friend, Hugh. "Got your robot disconnected from the grid. Stand by."

Jeff commanded his monkeybot to pull itself back up and retrieve a cable it had left dangling in the tree. The monkeybot opened a panel in its own chest. It then connected one end of the cable to itself, and the other to the dogbot's innards.

Working steadily, Jeff reprogrammed the dogbot. When he was satisfied, he had his monkeybot reconnect the dogbot's the wireless network antenna. It then disconnected the cable and replaced the panels on both itself and the dogbot.

"Hugh," Jeff texted, "You can get control of your robot again. Log on with the user name of MyDog and a password of DirkIsALoser. When you're done, send your dog to the farm. I'm sending my monkey there now."

Hugh sent back a smiley face and a thumbs-up icon with the text, "Thanks!"

Glancing back at Highborne, Jeff saw him turning a furious shade of purple. Smiling, he started the Science lesson he was supposed to be working on already. For about the hundredth time that day, Jeff pushed his wavy brown hair out of his eyes and mentally reminded himself that he needed a haircut.

Just then, Jeff received an ominous message from his teacher. "Jefferson Bowman: Come to my office after class," it said.

'Uh-oh,' thought Jeff. Being called into Sirsen Bering's office was usually not good news. And he hated it when his teacher called him Jefferson instead of just Jeff.

At the end of the school day, Jeff presented himself at Sirsen Bering's desk at the front of the room. "Let's go in my office," Sirsen Bering said. They stepped through a door behind Sirsen Bering's desk and sat down in his small office.

Sirsen Bering looked at Jeff gravely. "Jeff, did you know that there's a program on the school's network that notifies the teacher if any of the students are sending messages when they shouldn't?"

Jeff shook his head, but didn't say anything. 'I'm toast,' he thought.

Sirsen Bering continued, "I know you were getting a robot back for Hubert Benson that Dirk Highborne had stolen."

Feeling that he was in serious trouble, Jeff tried to explain. "I ... well, you see ... I ..." Jeff looked down at his feet and stammered. "Uh ... he likes to be called Hugh instead of Hubert," he finally said.

'Idiot,' he thought, 'what a stupid thing to say.'

Sirsen Bering smiled gently and waved him silent. "I know. I also know that Dirk Highborne is a bully and a thief. But, as I'm sure you know, his mother's a vice principal at this school. Every time he gets into trouble, she gets him off. She's also on the Sector Council, so if he gets into trouble with the police on any floor within this sector, she protects him from them as well. As a result, there's nothing that I or the other teachers can do to help you kids deal with Dirk. We'll lose our jobs if we try, and jobs are too hard to come by these days. I appreciate you stepping in and helping Hubert, uh, Hugh. But please don't do it again during school hours. School is neither

the time nor the place for the kind of ‘adventures’ that you had today. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sirsen Bering.”

“Good. You can go now. Goodbye Jefferson. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Out in the corridor, Hugh immediately scurried up to Jeff. “Did you get your Science assignment done?” he asked.

Even though Jeff was slightly tall for his age, he towered over Hugh, who was much shorter. “Almost,” Jeff lied. He didn’t want Hugh to feel bad because he spent so much time getting his robot back.

“I can help you with it,” Hugh offered eagerly.

“Thanks, but it would help me more if you would do my weeding on the farm tonight.”

“Sure,” Hugh smiled. He hesitated. “Jeff, thanks for getting my robot back.”

Before Jeff could answer, his friends Akio and Harriet walked up. Harriet, who everyone called Harry, asked, “Did you get it?”

Triumphantly, Jeff flashed smile and answered, “Yup. Highborne is so predictable. He heard you two talking just like we planned and had the dog up in the park looking for the farm. He probably still doesn’t know why he was disconnected. He just kept pounding on his datapad.” Jeff imitated Highborne’s furious pounding. The others laughed.

Together, the four of them walked home. As they rode an elevator down twenty-five floors, Hugh made jokes about Highborne. They dropped Hugh off at his apartment first. Although no one said so, everyone knew why. Hugh was a year younger and a full head smaller than all the other guys in their grade. His slight build made him an easy target for bullies like Highborne.

Dirk Highborne was a coward. He never went after anyone in groups. Instead, he targeted kids he knew he could beat up. So they all moved together when not with an adult.

After going up to their floor, Jeff and Akio dropped Harry off next. Highborne was not above bullying girls. The two boys lived next door to each other so neither of them had to be alone when going home.

Arriving at their flats, Akio waved as he passed through his front door. Jeff paused. All around him, kids were just getting home. Younger children, whose school days ended earlier, were already playing along the sides of the pale corridor. As always, the 10-year-old Telford twins were bouncing a ball off of every passing hovertram that floated by. The drivers routinely shouted at them, but that didn’t seem to deter them any.

Jeff went inside the small flat. It had only one bedroom, which was Jeff’s. When he was little, the bedroom had been his parents’ and Jeff slept on a bed that pulled out from the couch. After Jeff’s mother died, his father traded with him. “I really don’t need a room of my own,” he told Jeff. “But now that you’re getting to be a teenager, you need some space for yourself.”

Because of his homework, he wouldn’t be able to do anything besides water his parts of their hidden farm. Hugh would have to use his dogbot to pull Jeff’s share of the weeds tonight. Weeding was a daily chore. The air currents inside the dome brought up the seeds of many types of plants from the park below.

Half an hour later, Jeff was well into his Science lesson. He read about primitive methods of space propulsion. The examples showed video of the early rockets to Jupiter. "Until gravity mirrors were invented," a voice from the video said, "deep space missions used fission-powered rockets that superheated water until it turned into highly pressured hot gasses. The gasses were then allowed to escape through the nozzle at the back of the rocket. This method of propulsion enabled pioneering ships to travel without carrying so much fuel. When they reached Jupiter, the ancient astronauts of the 21st century refueled their ships by digging up the water ice that covers Europa, one of the giant planet's moons."

Abruptly, an evil-looking dragon popped its head into the upper corner of his datapad and blew fire. The fire turned into a text message that read, "Are you busy?"

Jeff smiled, paused the video, picked up his datapad, and slid open a little compartment on the back. He removed a small earpiece with a microphone attached to it. Placing the earpiece in his ear and adjusting the microphone, he tapped the Talk icon on his pad. "What's up?"

Akio told him, "Harry and I were talking." Jeff looked down at his datapad. Sure enough, Harry's red-haired fairy appeared in the message section of Jeff's datapad.

She broke in. "The three of us can't keep watch over Hugh forever," she said. "Dirk's going to find him alone sometime—probably sometime soon. Jeff, I think it's time we started asking some of the others to help out with him."

"I suppose you're right," Jeff sighed. "I just haven't done it because the others don't seem to like him much."

The fairy on Jeff's datapad made a stern face. "You've got to give them a chance. I know Hugh's really ... awkward around people. But he's got to start to make friends with everyone so he can help out too."

"She's right," Akio agreed.

"Yup, I know. Look, I've got to finish my Science lesson. Let's have an eChat with everyone together the day after tomorrow. We can get together after dinner. What chatworld shall we meet in?"

Akio shouted at once, "Dragon's Crag! Dragon's Crag!" His dragon excitedly shot a pillar of fire upward.

Harry's fairy stuck out her tongue. "We always go there. I want something different."

Knowing which virtual world she wanted them to meet in, Jeff suggested, "We haven't been to Merfolk's Keep for awhile."

The dragon stomped off the screen while the fairy did a dance. "I'll send the invitations," Harry told him, and she signed off.

Returning to his Science lesson, Jeff continued working on the assignment. The datapad was another advantage of living in an arcology. Everyone got one for free. They contained hundreds of thousands of books, school lessons, games, songs, and entertainment programs when the residents received them. For a fee, you could get regular updates broadcast directly to your datapad over the network. The updates had newer and better content. However, most people Jeff knew just got by with the free stuff.

At 5:30, Jeff put his homework aside and began cooking dinner in the small kitchen section of the flat. He took out blocks of synthpaste and cut them into bite-

sized chunks. Jeff chopped up vegetables from his portion of the clandestine farm and mixed them into the bland stew he was cooking.

Because of the vegetables and fruit he grew, he was able to use only half of their monthly ration of synthpaste. His father didn't know because he left all of the shopping and cooking to Jeff. Jeff didn't like keeping secrets from his dad any more than the others in the group liked keeping secrets from their families, but the farm was too important to their futures. He and his friends did the same for their school lunches. Their parents just thought they didn't eat much at lunch. It left more synthpaste for their families. They sold the rest of the food they grew to a store on level 2811. The store's owner was glad to get their fresh fruits and vegetables—and he didn't ask many questions.

As always, Jeff's dad, whose name was Kent, walked in at exactly 6 p.m. "Hey kid," he said as a greeting.

"Hi, Dad. How was work?"

Kent scratched his thick, slightly graying hair, scrunched his face and replied, "Ok. Same old thing. Dinner smells good. Whatcha makin'?"

"Nothin' special. Just beef-flavored stew," Jeff replied.

"Kid, your cooking is *always* something special," Kent told him as he sniffed the bubbling mixture. "I swear you can do more with a chunk of synthpaste than anyone I know."

"Thanks, Dad. Dinner's almost ready. Can you set the table while I finish it?"

Kent stretched his muscular frame, stood, and folded down the table from the kitchen wall. Then he grabbed two chairs, unfolded them, and put them up to the table. He went to the cupboard and pulled out some bowls and large plastic cups.

"Hey Dad," Jeff commented.

"What?"

"A really good space combat simulator just got released as public domain. Wanna play it with me tonight?" Jeff invited. Like all his friends, Jeff anxiously kept track of games, movies, music, and computer programs that passed into the public domain because anything in the public domain was free.

"No thanks," Kent replied, "I'm going out for a while tonight. I have some things to do." Jeff knew what his dad was really saying. About four years after Jeff's mother died, Kent had started dating. In the beginning, it was only once a week. But things changed shortly after Jeff turned 14, his dad seemed to want to get out of the flat almost every night.

'We played games together lots until he started dating,' Jeff recalled, withering a little inside. He told Kent, "Ok. I guess I can work on my assignment until bedtime anyway."

Although his dad seemed to be dating regularly now, he didn't talk with Jeff much about the women he was seeing. Jeff recalled that when Kent started dating, he told Jeff that he wouldn't bring any women home until he was serious about one. Because his dad seemed to be going out so much, Jeff figured Kent was dating one woman in particular lately.

It seemed strange to Jeff that his father was dating. But Harry assured Jeff, "Your dad is a handsome man, even though he's 40. He's not fat and bald or anything. I'm sure a lot of women his age think he's good looking."

Jeff thought that was weird. But when he said that to Akio and Harry, Harry replied, “Even old people get lonely, Jeff. I’m sure your father would rather be married.” Harry seemed to know about those kinds of things.

While Jeff finished setting the table, Kent got out his datapad and typed a short message. He seemed happy with the reply.

During dinner, Jeff asked Kent to tell him some of his stories from when he was a Senior Engineer on a starship. Kent was always pleased to repeat his tales, which seemed to get taller with each retelling. Jeff enjoyed hearing them, but he sometimes wished they could find more to talk about.

As Jeff listened again to his father’s adventures, he dreamed of the day when he could enter the Academy and have a career in the Space Corps. ‘Thanks to my farm,’ he thought, ‘I might just be able to make that dream come true.’

When they finished their meal, Kent did the dishes while Jeff returned to his datapad to complete his schoolwork. Before Kent left, he went in the bathroom to shave. He waved cheerfully to Jeff as he went out for the evening.

“Jeff, your angle of descent is too steep. You’re going to ... ”

An alarm blared and the panel in front of Jeff turned into a blaze of red lights. His shuttle pod lurched to the side. Jeff was saved from being tossed against the wall by the straps that held him to his seat. Frantically, Jeff’s hands flew over the controls as he tried to slow the careening pod’s descent. It didn’t work; the pod lurched again and flipped upside down.

“Jeff, this is Control. You’re going to have to abort.”

“No! No!” Jeff shouted back. “I can handle it!” He was sure he could complete the landing.

Working the shuttle pod’s controls like a maniac, Jeff managed to get its nose pointed straight down. Its speed was increasing dangerously. The hull shuddered sickeningly as the control panel flashed insane patterns of red lights at him. Jeff hastily wiped the sweat from his brow and continued his efforts.

“Hull temperature increasing,” said the pod’s computer in a calm, monotone female voice.

Slowly, Jeff managed to pull the pod into the correct flight position and got control of it.

“Hull temperature at maximum,” the computer told him blandly. “Warning,” it continued, “hull breach is imminent.”

The air outside the pod’s front window glowed a bright orange. Jeff was worried. If he didn’t get the pod slowed down, it would burn up in the atmosphere.

Drenched in sweat, he applied a strong reverse thrust. The window went blank. The computer said, “Thrust too strong. The hull has breached and the pod has exploded.”

The program ended. Jeff opened his eyes and the simulated spacecraft was gone. The door to the artificial reality pod was open, so he sat up. Jeff’s instructor for his Young Pilot’s Association class stood next to a screen near the pod.

“That started out as a good reentry,” he told Jeff. “But your angle of descent got to be too steep. You can’t come in that fast and stay alive. You’ll burn up every time. I was impressed how you handled things when it flipped over though. Not many of my students could have got their pods right side up like you did. If you had applied a smaller reverse thrust, you would have been ok.”

Still shaken, Jeff climbed out of the AR pod.

“Don’t worry about it Jeff,” his instructor consoled cheerily. “Almost everyone fails their first reentry in these little pods. They’re not like the freighters you’re used to. They’re much lighter and more maneuverable. That’s why the so many pilots like them. But they’re also much harder to handle during reentry. You can try again next week.”

Sadly, Jeff left the AR suite. He was surprised to find Akio waiting for him. “You’re done already?” he asked.

“Yup,” Akio told him. “I crashed my shuttle pod five minutes ago. My trajectory was off and I hit a passenger liner. Killed nearly 300. It was so sad.” Akio sighed melodramatically.

Leaving the AR suite together, Akio commented, "I wish we could get some extra money together."

"Why?" Jeff asked.

"I want to go to the AR suite. There's a new game out called 'Brice Yee: Frenzied Feet of Flaming Fury' and I want to give it a try."

Jeff commented doubtfully, "They charge more for playing in new programs."

"Tell me about it," snorted Akio. "It costs an arm and a leg to play."

As they walked, they met Harry, who was returning from playing powertennis with her sister, Ruth Ann. The two girls were nearly mirror images of each other, except that Ruth Ann was taller, a couple of years older, and Ruth Ann's hair was a deep auburn rather than dazzling red like Harry's.

Together, they took an elevator to their floor. The elevator, which ran along the outside of the arcology, was made of a clear, super-strong plastic. It enabled them to see the vast city Outside as they descended. The May sky was clear and the setting sun turned it a deep orange-red color.

"I always like riding an outside elevator," Harry sighed.

"You say that every time we ride these," Akio shot back.

Harry stuck out her tongue. "I do not."

Before Akio could answer, Jeff broke in, "What do you want to do tomorrow before the study session?"

"Surf-ing! Surf-ing!" Akio shouted immediately. An older couple on the other side of the huge elevator scowled at him severely. Ruth Ann giggled.

"Shhh!" Harry hissed, turning an embarrassed pink. "You always want to go surfing. Let's do something else. How about hovercarts?"

"Surf-ing! Surf-ing!"

"I want to do something else!"

"Surf-ing! Surf-ing!"

Jeff looked at Harry. She was right, they did surf a lot. But the water park was free and riding the hovercarts cost money. "You chose the eChat world. Why not let him chose this one?" Harry scowled. "Besides," he continued, "I'd kind of like to surf too."

"But my bathing suit is so old," Harry objected. "And I haven't saved enough money for a new one yet."

"What's wrong with your bathing suit?" Jeff asked. "You look good in it." Ruth Ann smiled at him approvingly.

"Oh, alright," Harry yielded, but she looked happier.

Jeff and Akio dropped Harry and Ruth Ann off at their flat. As they arrived outside their own flats, Akio said to Jeff, "You sure know how to talk to girls."

Jeff shrugged. "I don't know. I just say what I think. Harry seems to like that."

"I say what I think too," Akio observed, "but she doesn't seem to like it *near* as much." He had a sly look on his face.

Jeff shrugged again. He didn't know what Akio was getting at, but he didn't think he wanted to talk about it. He said goodbye and went in.

Kent was sitting on the sofa watching a show on his datapad. "Hey kid," he greeted Jeff and paused his show.

"Hi, Dad."

"I was thinking," Kent began, "since Friday is the start of a three-day weekend, why not go do some camping?"

Jeff was surprised. “Really?”

“Yup, we haven’t been in a couple of years. I booked some artificial reality pods for us. We’ll get to hunt buffalo with an Indian tribe in the ancient West.”

Jeff thought silently, ‘We haven’t been camping since just after Mom died.’ Out loud he said, “Thanks, Dad.”

Kent smiled and returned to his program—at least until he got a message on his datapad. Then he said, “I think I’m going to duck out for a while. Are you ok on your own again tonight?”

Woodenly, Jeff replied, “Sure, Dad. I’ll be fine.”

Jeff turned away and went dejectedly into his room. Out of the blue, he remembered how happy he had been each time his father came back from space. ‘He always did a lot of things with me back then,’ Jeff thought sadly. ‘It made up for all the time he was gone.’

Settling onto his bed, Jeff played a game for about half an hour. Suddenly, his bedroom door burst open. Jeff nearly jumped out of his skin when two men with white-blond hair stormed in. One of the men pulled a handheld scanner from his pocket and scanned Jeff.

“This is the one,” the man said to his companion.

“Wh ... what are you doing here?” Jeff demanded in alarm. “How did you get into our flat? The door isn’t supposed to let people in unless we say so.”

The pair didn’t react. The man with the scanner ordered, “Take him.” The other man pulled a stunner from his pocket.

Leaping to his feet in near panic, Jeff screamed, “Take me? Take me where? Who are you? Why are you in our flat?”

Abruptly, two towering figures appeared in the room. They were humanoid but clearly not human. The upper portions of their bodies resembled humans, but they each had four crablike legs.

Both Jeff and the intruders were frozen at the sight of the aliens. This was clearly not what the intruders had expected.

One of the aliens reached out its strange-looking hand. There was a gold band around its wrist. Surprisingly, a gold ball appeared and floated above its cupped palm. Weird symbols crawled in moving bands over the surface of the ball. The alien twitched its fingers and the symbols changed in response.

The two human intruders immediately went stiff. It was as if they had turned into living statues. Then the aliens turned toward Jeff.

Too panicked to even scream, Jeff stumbled backwards until he bumped against the wall. One of the aliens waved his hand and Jeff collapsed unconscious and face down onto the bed.

Gliding to Jeff’s side, the alien gently laid him on his back. Checking to ensure that Jeff would be comfortable until he awoke, the alien then touched Jeff’s forehead for a moment. It turned to its companion.

If Jeff had been conscious, he would have heard the alien click, clack, and hiss to its companion. If, somehow, he could have understood the alien’s speech, he would have heard it say, “The boy is safe. All things will proceed as they should. Causality is preserved.”

The alien’s companion hissed his approval. Then he asked, “Will he remember the encounter?”

Clacking its negative response, the alien replied, “No. I have removed the memories. If any are left, he will think he fell asleep and had a bad dream. Now we must take these intruders and depart.”

Clicking agreement, the alien’s companion grabbed the two white-blond humans around the waist and hefted them easily. All four disappeared.

The next day was very ordinary, at least until lunch. As usual, Jeff, Akio, and Harry ate together. Jeff wolfed down his lunch while Harry nibbled hers. Between gulps, Jeff asked, “Harry, could you cut my hair? It’s *really* getting long.”

Harry’s green eyes sparkled, “Sure, Jeff. Come on over right after school and I’ll cut it then.” She flounced her long, red curls.

Akio poked at his food silently. After a minute or two, Harry noticed and asked, “What’s the matter with you?”

Startled, Akio asked warily. He ran his fingers through his short, thick, spiky black hair. “What makes you think something’s wrong?” he asked.

“Duh,” Harry shot back. “You’re not eating *or* talking. Normally you do both *all* the time.”

Akio’s eyes drooped down to his food. After a moment he said, “My family’s colonizing.”

Both Jeff and Harry were stunned. Jeff stammered, “Wh-what? You’re what? Where? When?”

Heaving a slow sigh, Akio answered, “My parents told me last night. We’re going to the New Tokyo system. A planet called Yokohama. Most of my relatives from Japan and Hawaii are already there.”

Jeff was speechless. Harry asked, “Will you ever come back? Will we ever see you again?”

“No,” Akio replied. “At least not until we’re grown up. The New Tokyo system is 259 light years from Earth. You don’t just drop by for a visit. It’s way too much money.”

Jeff questioned, “Why is your family colonizing now?”

“Dad’s probably going to be laid off. He’s one of the newest ones there and they always lay off the newest ones first. We leave in a month, right after school’s out.”

“Wow,” was all Jeff could say. He had known Akio as long as he could remember. Not having him around was something he couldn’t imagine.

Harry, as she always did, tried to make the best of things. “Maybe it’ll be nice there,” she offered.

Akio shrugged noncommittally. “That’s what my mom says. The whole planet’s an ocean. No land at all. People live in floating arcologies. There’s lots of jobs and most people do well there. They raise fish in big floating pens—fish farms. They make big money selling fish.”

Gloomily, Jeff moaned, “Who’s got money for real fish?”

“People all over the colonies are making good money. They buy fish,” Akio replied. “There’s even people on Earth who have enough money for fish, but it costs a lot.”

With a pained expression, Akio continued, “My relatives bought us tickets and all the synthpaste we need for the trip. They’ve even bought a flat for us. We have to pay them back, but Dad thinks we can do that in six years.”

Jeff was surprised. “You have to take your own food with you?”

“Yup,” Akio nodded. “When you go steerage class you do. Those are the cheapest tickets. They give you water on the ship, but you have to take your own food.”

Harry broke in, “And you leave in a month?”

Even more dejectedly, Akio nodded again. “Yup. Dad put our flat up for sale this morning. My mom just emailed me and said they sold it already to a family from Outside the arcology. So we’re all set to go. We just have to pack up our stuff.”

Jeff, Akio, and Harry didn’t have much to say to each other throughout the rest of the day. The trio had been inseparable for years. Now Akio was leaving, probably forever. They spent a very glum day.

After school, Jeff dug into his homework. As soon as he sat down to his lesson, the doorbell rang. When Jeff answered it, he found Kevin Gibson and his ten-year-old brother Logan. “Hi guys,” he greeted. “Come on in.” The Gibson brothers entered and plopped onto the couch. Jeff pulled out a folding chair and used that.

“So here’s the thing,” Kevin began immediately. “You know my dad left Earth to find work right?”

Surprised at his abruptness, Jeff nodded and asked, “Did he find anything?”

“Yes,” Kevin answered, “but he’s still traveling. He’ll be on a ship for another three months. That’s the problem. My dad took a job with mining company, but they don’t pay him until he gets there and starts working. But now my mother is sick and can’t work. We can’t afford to take her to the doctor.”

“Wow Kevin, I wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Well actually Jeff, there is. My mother and my brother are both living on less synthpaste than one person normally eats. I’ve been spending all of my ‘robot club’ money on food for them. If things keep going the way they are, I won’t be able to pay my share for lessons unless you let Logan into the group.”

Hesitantly, Jeff asked, “You mean into the robot club, don’t you?”

“No. I mean into the *real* group. We need the food and the money or both Mom and Logan will starve. I’ve been trying to mix in some of my food from the you-know-what. But if I do too much of that, my mom will find out the secret.”

Jeff looked at Logan thoughtfully. Logan seemed puzzled by the conversation. Standing, Jeff retrieved his datapad and turned it on. He sat back down, faced Kevin and queried, “Can he keep the secret?”

“Absolutely. Right Logan?”

Logan asked, “What secret?”

“Logan,” Jeff explained, “you have to absolutely promise that you won’t tell anyone our secret. Everyone’s future depends on this.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone in our group. If you blab, we’re all going to be poor the rest of our lives. This is the most important secret you’ll ever keep. If you can’t keep it, say so now.”

“I ... I can keep the secret,” Logan gulped, wide-eyed.

Jeff used his datapad to log onto his monkeybot. He held it on his lap so Logan could see. “We tell everyone our group is a robot club and that we fix up and sell robots to make money for lessons and books that will help us get into better high schools. If we go to a better high school, we can get into a better college. That means better jobs. Understand?”

Logan nodded.

Jeff continued, “Now here’s the secret part. Fixing and selling robots is not how we make our money—at least not most of it. We really keep most of the robots. We all have one. Our bots don’t really have much brains. I put wireless network adapters in all of our bots so we can control them from our datapads. But we use our datapads as the brains and the datapads send commands to our bots across the grid.”

In awe, Logan questioned, “How did you learn to do that?”

“My dad taught me the basics. I taught myself the rest. Now look here. You see that door my monkeybot is going into?”

“Yeah.”

“I wrote a program to make my bot go there when I was 12. The program guides the bot to that door. And that door is an entrance for maintenance robots. It leads to a series of ramps. The ramps go up among the big support beams that hold up the dome on top of the arcology, the one that covers the park.”

“You mean your bot is all the way on top of the arcology?”

Jeff nodded. “Yup.”

“Isn’t that against the rules?”

“That’s why we have to keep it secret.”

“Oh.”

Jeff continued, “When I was was 11, I was in the park and playing with my monkeybot. I looked up and noticed the ramps. I got curious and did some research on the grid. The ramps used to be used by maintenance robots that rolled around on wheels. These days, they have gravity mirrors. You know what those are?”

Logan nodded and replied, “They make things float in the air?”

“Right. So the maintenance robots don’t need the ramps anymore. But no one took the ramps down. The maintenance robots never look at the ramps when they float by. They’re programmed to repair the beams that hold up the dome, but they ignore everything else. I searched for weeks to find the door you just saw. But once I did, my robot was able to follow the ramps way up near the top of the dome. The ramps are in the sunlight every day so they’re the perfect spot to grow food.”

“*Grow food?*” Logan gasped. “You know how to grow food?”

“Sure,” Jeff answered, “we learned about it in school. You put seeds in dirt and add sunlight and water.”

“Dirt? You grow food in *dirt*?”

“Yup. And that’s the secret. We’re growing food up there on the ramps to eat and to sell. We use the money to buy lessons. And you can never, *never* tell anyone or our farm will be closed down. None of us will have the food *or* the lessons. Our entire futures are riding on this, Logan. You can’t tell no matter what.”

Nodding, Logan swore, “I’ll never tell. No matter what. I promise. But ... ”

“But what?”

“Where did you get the dirt?”

“Well, there’s no dirt in the arcology, except for in the park on top. But taking dirt from up there can get your whole family kicked out. So my friends Akio, Harriet and I pooled our money to buy a small bag of potting soil and a bag of compost starter mix at an expensive store on level 2831. That was the only place we could find it. People near the top of the arcology have money for things like dirt. They have flats big enough for potted plants and even gardens.”

“What’s compost?” Logan interrupted. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a way of making dirt from organic garbage like food scraps.”

Logan scratched his head and cast a confused look at his brother. Kevin assured Jeff, “I’ll explain it all to him later.” Logan shrugged and then nodded.

Jeff continued, “We started with that one bag of dirt and composted our kitchen scraps to make more. It took us months of working at it, but we finally got enough to plant a couple of short rows of vegetables. We’ve kept going and now our farm stretches over lots of ramps. It’s hundreds of feet long.”

“Whoa! For real?”

“Yup. And every day we have to do chores on our farm if we want to get food. Watch.” Jeff tapped commands into his datapad to run a program that made his monkeybot fetch a container of water and carry it up the ramps. The water came from a faucet not far inside the robot maintenance door.

“See that faucet? It used to be used for cleaning the dome. These days, it’s ignored so we use it to water our crops. We use our bots to plant crops, carry water, do the weeding, and harvest.”

Kevin interjected, “Logan and I can share my bot. I’ll get up early and do my chores in the morning, and Logan can do his after school.”

Jeff nodded. “That works,” he said. “At least until you can buy Logan a bot of his own. I’ll get some money from the seed fund to buy you starter seeds. After that, everything depends on you, Logan.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Whether your farm works or not depends on how hard you work. Some of us make pretty good money. Others just barely get by. It all depends on you.”

“I’ll work *really* hard,” Logan promised.

Jeff smiled and told him, “I bet you will.”

Jeff stood. Kevin and Logan copied him. “Ok Logan,” Jeff told them as he showed them toward the door, “you’re in the group. But remember, if you tell the secret, you’ll starve. And everyone else’s future is gone. Never, never tell the secret.”

“I won’t. I swear.”

Kevin and Logan thanked Jeff, said their goodbyes, and left. Jeff returned to his homework. By evening, Jeff was ready for the group meeting. It would take his mind off of Akio’s departure. After dinner, Kent did the dishes and then went out again for the evening.

Going into his room, Jeff folded up his desk and chair, inflated his bed, and plopped himself down on it. Pulling out his datapad, he put in his earpiece, adjusted the microphone, and called Akio.

“Ready to go?” Akio’s dragon asked as soon as he answered Jeff’s call.

“Sure,” Jeff replied. Jeff’s avatar was a wizard dressed in leather and shaggy furs, and carrying a magic staff. Jeff made it climb onto the back of Akio’s dragon. “Let’s go.”

With a jet of flame and a roar, Akio’s dragon ponderously flapped its wings. It rose into a clear blue sky.

Harry was hosting the eChat on her datapad. Jeff used a link in the invitation to connect. When he and Akio were accepted, a shimmering circle of light appeared in the air in front of their avatars. The dragon flew into the circle, and instantly their avatars were transported to Merfolk’s Keep.

Akio's dragon circled above the lush, green island a couple of times. Looking down, Jeff could see Harry's fairy sitting on a rock in the lagoon. They were too high up to tell, but she was probably playing her flute while the mermaids sang. Jeff and Akio descended and landed on the white-sand beach. Jeff made his wizard avatar climb down from Akio's dragon.

Everyone in the group had their own avatar. As Jeff looked around, he could see that most of the group was already there. Some of them were on the balcony of the ornate golden castle above the beach, but most were on the beach itself.

As usual, Ally Wilson, whose avatar was a warrior princess, was having kickboxing matches with several of the guys. And as usual, she was winning. Further down the beach, Kevin Gibson was trying to get into the volleyball game. The other players didn't want to let him in because his avatar was a 24 foot tall giant. It gave him an unfair advantage. Eventually, he wandered off and went to wrestle the sea monster in the lagoon.

Harry's fairy flew to them, her pale blue wings shimmering. Her fairy's knee-length red hair flowed gently behind her. "You're late," she scolded.

"Nice to see you too," Akio said sarcastically. The fairy stuck out her tongue in reply.

"Everyone's here but Hugh," Harry told them. "I tried calling him, but he doesn't answer. His datapad says he's busy."

Jeff said simply, "Then we wait."

Akio heaved a sigh and said, "Whatever." He wandered over to Kevin Gibson's avatar, shot a jet of flame at the giant's rear end, and challenged him to a fight. Within moments, they were happily knocking the stuffing out of each other.

As they watched Akio and Kevin duke it out, Jeff asked, "Were you playing your flute with the mermaids?"

Harry's voice brightened, "Yeah. You wanna hear the song?"

"Sure."

At that moment, an icon flashed on Jeff's datapad. "Wait," he said to Harry. "I'm getting a call from Hugh."

Jeff tapped the icon and said, "Hugh, where are you?"

"Jeff," Hugh answered excitedly, "I struck gold!"

"What?" Jeff asked, puzzled.

"Yesterday I was exploring with my dogbot after I did your farm chores. I transformed it into humanoid mode so it could climb. I found an access shaft that runs up the building next to the main garbage chute. There's a side shaft that runs right to a restaurant on level 2998. They serve *real food* there, and you wouldn't believe what they're throwing away."

Hugh's dogbot, like most toy robots, could transform into a human-like figure with hands and feet. In humanoid mode, the robot could climb and walk like a small person.

"Wait, Hugh. How do you know they serve real food?"

"The side shaft runs along the outside of the chute. I pulled off a panel like we did in the school cafeteria. I'm using my net to catch garbage. I just got an *entire* head of lettuce that they threw away because part of it was a little brown."

Shortly after starting their farm, Jeff, Akio, and Harry realized that the little blobs of leftover synthpaste they scraped off of their family's plates when they cleaned the

dishes would never provide enough compost. With their robots, they found an access shaft that ran just outside the garbage chute of their school's cafeteria. When they wanted to collect food scraps for compost, they had their robots remove a panel on the garbage shoot and use a homemade net to catch blobs of synthpaste going by. The entire group took turns collecting garbage from the cafeteria for their compost piles.

"You're kidding," Jeff said.

"Nope. I got a whole big bag of real food. All my bot can carry. This is more than I get in a week from the cafeteria."

"Man," Jeff breathed, "you *did* strike gold."

"Everyone else should get their bots up here too. I'm sending a map. Seriously, Jeff, we can double the size of the farm in a few months."

Hugh hung up while Jeff sent a broadcast message to everyone in the group explaining what Hugh found.

Harry was pleased. "Hugh will be a hero," she said. "It won't be hard to get the others to watch out for him now."

Like the other members of the group, Jeff immediately disconnected from the eChat and activated his monkeybot. Far above him in the ramps on top of the arcology, the monkeybot made its way toward the maintenance shaft on Hugh's map. As it began its downward climb through the arcology's service tunnels, Jeff plotted a course for it that would take it to the restaurant's garbage chute. When it arrived, it would automatically begin collecting compostable garbage.

Happy with how the evening turned out, Jeff spent a couple hours playing the battered old guitar his uncle gave him for his fourteenth birthday.