

Dad read the mail. He frowned.

“What’s the matter?” asked Nicky.

Dad read a letter out loud, “The Global Foundation is happy to confirm the arrival of your exchange student. He will arrive at 10 a.m. on Saturday 10th August. His name is Alec.”



Nicky and Tom looked at one another.  
“Dad, that’s today!” they cried.

Dad scratched his head. “I know,” he said. “Another letter came from the same place a few weeks ago. The thing is, I don’t remember agreeing to take an exchange student. It’s really odd.”



We all met at school early on a Monday morning. The coach picked us up and we set off.

I sat by myself but that was ok; I enjoyed watching the fields go by.

After five hours we turned off the main road.



“Are you alright to get off here?” asked the coach driver.

“Not really,” replied Miss Johnson, “we were told the coach would take us right up to the campsite.”

The driver took a deep breath. “OK,” he said, but he didn’t look happy.

We’d only gone a short way when the driver pulled the coach to a sudden stop.

“I’m sorry!” he blurted out, “but I’m not going any further!”

We looked out of the window. The campsite was about half a mile ahead.

“What’s going on?” asked Mr Wilson.



He was good at telling what they were thinking from looking at their faces.

In the Wild West there were no hearing aids to help people. He could talk a bit, but usually he got by making signs.

Also Ben did not like guns. He didn't want to kill anyone. It wasn't right.

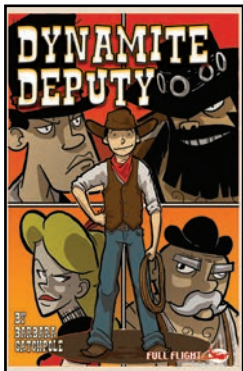
Ben thought that even bad people could change. They couldn't change if you had shot them dead!

As Ben grew up, he decided he was going to be a sheriff just like his Dad.

He was going to use a lasso and his strength to keep the law.

He went out into the hills to get fit and to practise with his lasso.

He would lasso his horse and let it go. Then he would slap its rump to make it run and do it again. The horse got very bored!



Amy's Dad looked cross. "There are no such things as ghosts," he said.

Amy also liked playing tricks on people.

She LOVED playing tricks on her younger brother Jed.



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That night Jed sneaked out of bed.

He tiptoed into the kitchen and raided the fridge for a midnight snack.

He took a big bite out of a slab of cheese. It tasted awful.

"Yuk!" he shrieked.

He tried to spit it out and bubbles came floating out of his mouth.

Someone has swapped the cheese for a bar of yellow soap!

It must have been Amy, thought Jed angrily.

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It seemed friendly, so he carefully picked it up.

It had beautiful smooth fur, and a small round face.

The creature giggled and smiled.

Mark had to take this thing home. It was the coolest thing he had ever seen. He slipped it into his bag and hurried home.

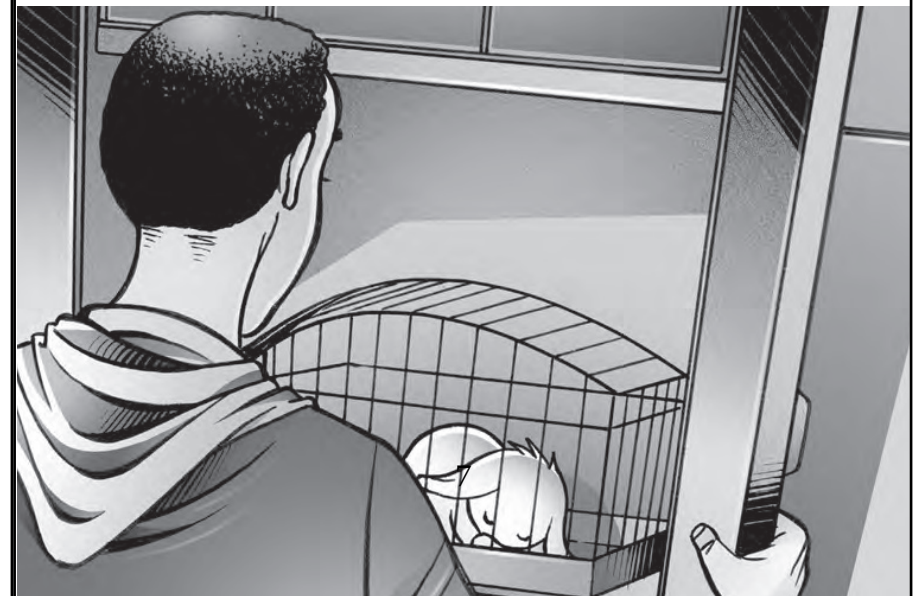
“Dinner is ready,” shouted Mark’s Mum as he ran up the stairs to his room.

“OK, Mum!” he yelled back. “I will be down in a second!”

He quickly ran to his wardrobe, where he had an old hamster cage stashed. “There you go,” Mark whispered to the creature. “This will do for now.”

The next day Mark checked on the little creature before he went to school. It was curled up in a ball fast asleep.

“Perfect,” said Mark quietly. “I will see you later little guy.”



“Which is...?”

“Look out of the window.”

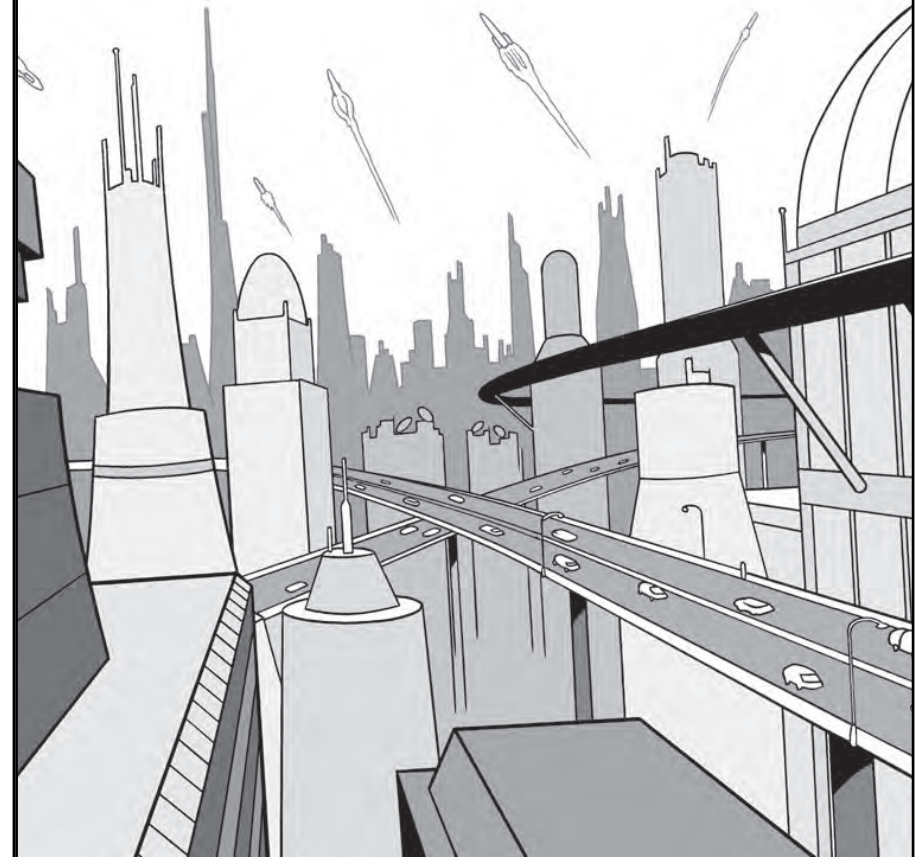
They looked. The spacenav had brought them to a system of planets, which was good. If it had gone totally wrong, they could have ended up inside a sun – not so good.

Ava pointed to a green-looking planet.  
“We’re in luck! There’s life on that planet. Let’s head there!”

Dan wasn’t so sure. They had discovered life on many planets. Sometimes it was friendly, but sometimes...

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It was a very busy planet. There were cities, with roads connecting them, and aircraft buzzing through the sky.



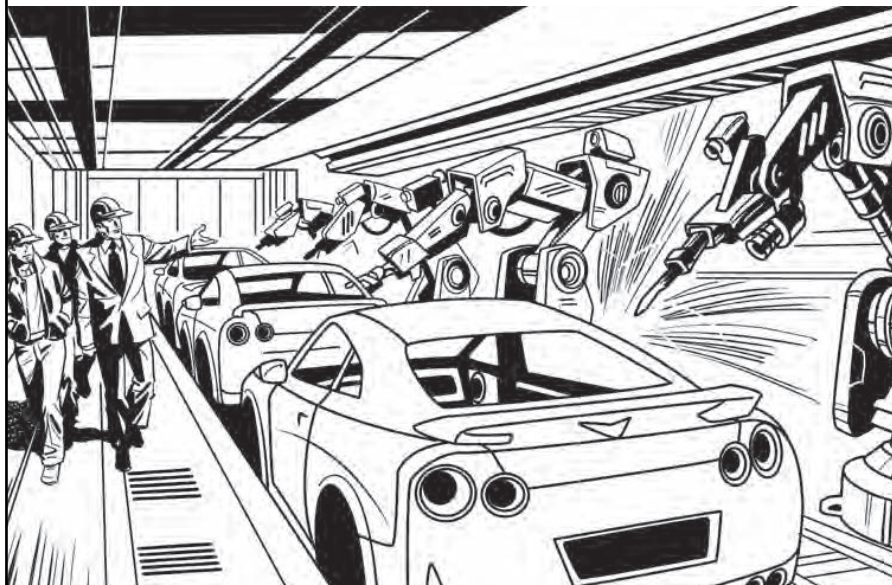
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“Well, you are here to look at the robots, not the cars,” Mr Jones reminded them.

“Our production line is fully automated here. Parts assembly, welding, spray painting, the robots do it all.”

Mr Jones took them up to the factory floor. Now they could hardly hear what he was saying over the noise.



In front of them, hundreds of robots were at work. As cars moved along in front of them, the robots swung into action like great yellow dinosaurs.

Their heads nodded and spun, orange sparks flying out like dragon’s breath.

“They have machine vision which acts as their eyes,” Mr Jones was saying.

But Reece wasn’t listening. A robot at the end of the line was flicking spray paint at the robot next to it.

The other robot swung round and welded a stud to its camera lens eye, sending it into frenzied clicking.





Every person who had worked at the old stadium – every cleaner, ticket seller, security guard – was also sacked.

The new owners got rid of them all.

On the way to the game, Grandad Jim told Amy the story.

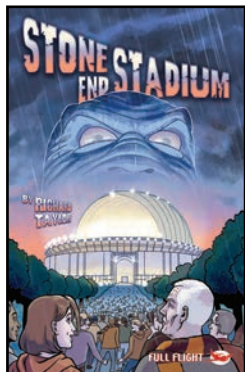


“Last year United had no money, wasted it all on rubbish players. The club was doomed. But out of nowhere United were bought by new owners: The Scraven Group. It was a mystery.”

“No one had ever heard of the Scraven Group. No one knew who they were. But no one cared. They had loads of money. The boss, Mr Scraven, said he would pay to build a new stadium.”

Amy smiled at the thought. But Jim kept talking.

“I know everyone’s excited, but what they did was wrong. Poor Ted.”

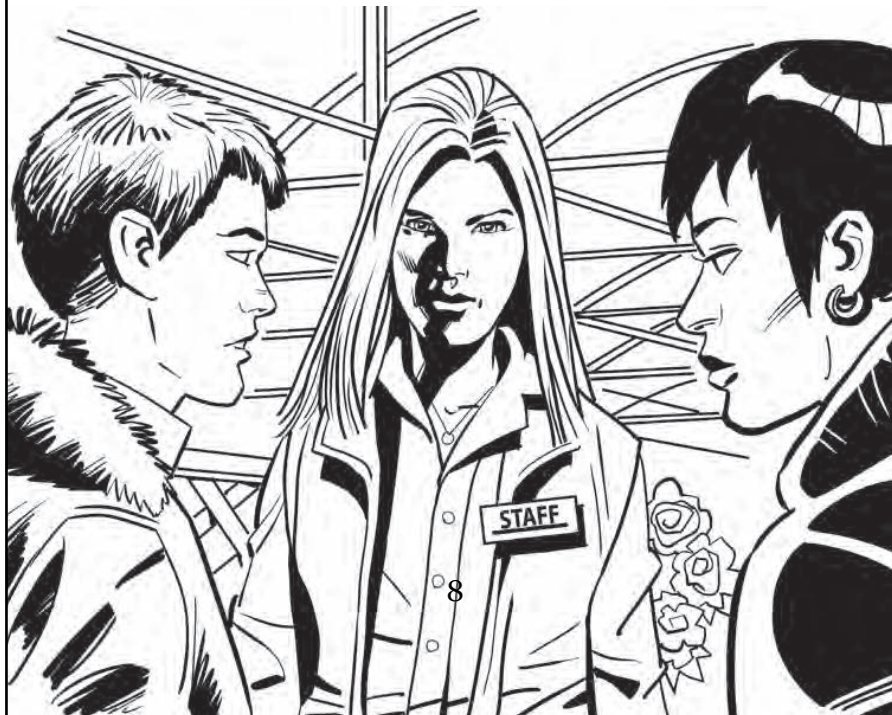




“When did this store open?” said Zoe.  
“It seems to have sprung out of  
nowhere.”

“Can I help you?” repeated the woman,  
her glassy eyes moving from Zoe to  
Nick and back again.

“Er... we were just...” tried Nick.



“Can I help you?” said the woman for a  
third time.

“No, we’re fine,” said Zoe.

She and Nick hurried to the exit.

“That woman was creepy,” said Zoe  
when they were outside.

“Nah,” laughed Nick, “she was just  
boring. That’s why she’s working in a  
place like that.”

But Zoe felt uneasy.

The store and the woman had spooked  
her out.



They were being packed off for the whole summer while Mum and Dad worked.

Uncle Evan lived in the countryside in Wales. It was a long way from Connor and Bek's home in the city.

Finally the train slowed down and stopped at a tiny station.



“This is it,” said Bek. “This is Penbryn.”

“Great,” said Connor. “It looks like a one-horse town. Except the horse left.”

Bek usually argued with him, but she looked as miserable as he felt.

A tall man with a thick, heavy beard pulled open the train door.

“You must be Connor and Becky,” he said. “You’ve grown a lot since I last saw you.”

