**Astronuts**

‘I think we’d better be getting back now,’ said Alan.

‘Oh come on,’ protested Beth, ‘we’ve still got plenty of time. I’ve got something really cool to show you.’

In a star system many, many light-years away, Alan and Beth, a couple of young Zarkians (alien beings, for want of a better term), were taking their parents’ Galaxy Hopper spacecraft for a quick spin before supper. Actually, they weren’t really named Alan and Beth (we Earthlings couldn’t pronounce their names if we tried) but it does help to call them something. Nor did they ‘say’ anything: they communicated by projecting their thoughts into each other’s minds. Oh, and their ‘spacecraft’ was nothing like any spaceship you could ever imagine, but that’s not your fault.

It’s all rather complicated, but human minds are far too simple to comprehend how these beings look, talk or travel. Perhaps it’s best if you just envisage two green creatures whizzing around in a flying saucer, or your head might implode. One thing is true, however: they really were in peril of being late for supper.

Nipping between the fifth and sixth dimensions (so much quicker than crawling along through space and time), Beth popped the craft into a solar system that Alan had never visited before. The vehicle skidded between two large planets – one with attractive but otherwise unexceptional ice rings; the other with too many moons for its own good – and Beth slammed on the retro-boosters. There before them loomed a greeny-blue planet, swathed in water vapour.

‘What is this place?’ asked Alan.

‘It’s a funny little rock I stumbled across by accident,’ Beth replied. ‘It’s so remote and unremarkable, I’m not sure many of our kind know about it. Hold tight!’

Beth yanked the controls and the craft lurched to one side. A small metallic lump sailed past them from the direction of the planet, bleeping pathetically.

‘What in the black hole was that?’

‘Not sure, but I have seen one before. It was trying to land on the next-door planet, but it made such a mess of it that it fell over and conked out. Naturally, I put it upright again and fiddled with its power source, which seemed to cheer it up, but it really didn’t seem to know what it was doing. It just squatted there, scratching around in the dust. Maybe they’re for exploration, but it’s unbelievable that creatures could be so basic that they haven’t even gone beyond their own solar system yet.

‘Anyway, want to take a closer look at the planet? We just have to be a little careful of all the junk they leave orbiting the place, messy creatures, then we can have a little fun with one of them.’

‘Is that wise? Don’t they bite, or something?’

‘Nah! Stop worrying! I’ve done this quite a few times now.’

Resting on his pitchfork under a vast prairie sky, Thaddeus Jackson wiped his hands on his denim dungarees, tipped back the brim of his straw hat and glanced towards the western horizon. Night was falling – time to head back to the farm. Tuesday night was bean stew night!

Suddenly, something caught his eye. What could it be? At first it looked like an unusually bright star, but it was moving. Fast. A plane? But surely no man-made aircraft would career across the sky as chaotically as that.

Closer and closer came the light, changing colours all the while from golds and silvers to greens, blues, oranges and reds. Eventually, it hovered as a shimmering orb, about the size of a house, so close that Thaddeus felt he could touch it. Instead, he stepped back as a hexagon of pure white mist appeared on the surface of the scintillating object and lowered to form a portal of light so bright he could hardly bare to look.

Out of the glare emerged the silhouette of a vaguely human form, but slimmer and taller. What looked like another being’s head peered round from the side of the doorway. Strange, otherworldly music drifted through Thaddeus’s mind, filling him with a wonderful sense of wellbeing. Then a voice swirled into his consciousness repeating the words, ‘Life. Love. Chocolate …. Life. Love. Chocolate’ over and over again for about a minute.

The poor farm-hand stood hypnotised, his heart torn between terror and rapture. Was he the one? Had he been chosen for a higher purpose?

Nope.

Abruptly, what appeared to be an arm, or a tentacle, grabbed the first figure and yanked it back inside. With unseemly haste, the mist door slammed shut, the ground shuddered and the orb shot straight upwards, out of sight.

Thaddeus fell to his knees, begging, ‘Take me with you, enlightened ones,’ but they were gone. Still trying to make sense of what he had seen, he sprinted home and telephoned everyone he knew and some he didn’t, including the local radio station.

For the next couple of days, the local farming community could talk of little else. A few people thought that they, too, had seen a strange light in the sky, but no one could fully confirm his story.

Two weeks later, Thaddeus featured on page 47 of the *Midwest Ufology Gazette* (M.U.G. for short), grinning at the camera, candy bar in hand.

An unimaginable distance away, Alan and Beth were fizzing about the craft in hysterics.

‘That was totally wicked!’ cried Alan.

‘I know! And they fall for it every time,’ said Beth.

‘What was that “Life, love, chocolate” nonsense about?’

‘I just read the collective thoughts of their species and regurgitate their greatest desires. They then seem to believe that it’s some profound message. Simple really - just like them.’

Still howling with laughter, they star-jumped all the way back to their home system. Overriding the parking tractor beam, they sneaked around the dark side of their planet and touched down in the deepest part of their parents’ crater.

Just as they were trying to creep into their sleeping pods, a booming thought crashed into their minds. ‘Where in the cosmos have you two been? I’ve been worried sick! Just you wait till your father gets home!’