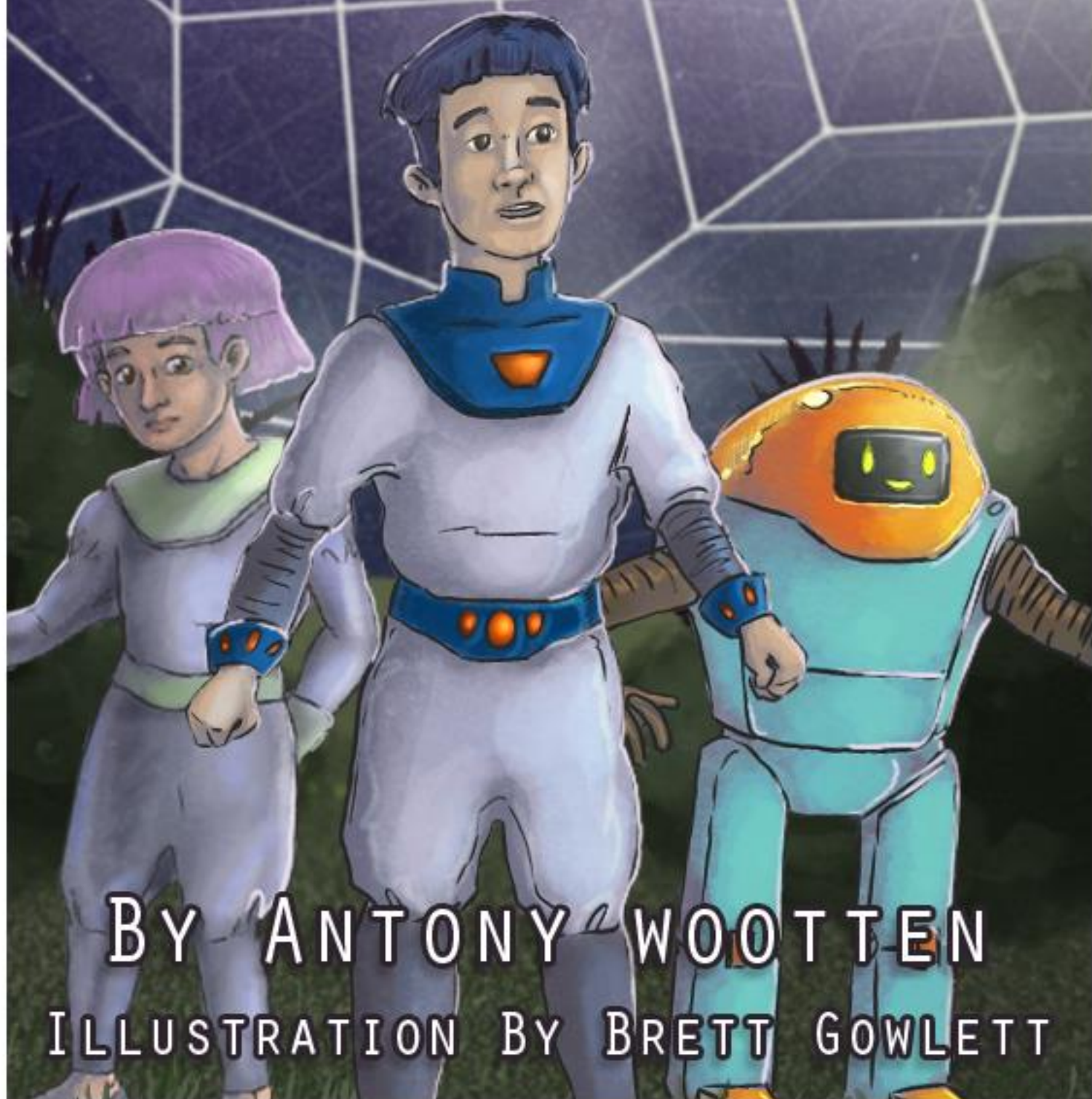


SERPENTS OF THE NEBULA



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CHAPTER 1

Tazz enjoyed strolling in the garden between the banks of bright and varied flowers and shrubs. Unlike in the rest of the ship, the air here was filled with a fine mist that felt pleasant against his face. Bright lights shone down from the domed glass roof, providing a substitute for the sunlight the plants needed. The heat from the lights was intense, but tall trees towered above the flowers, shading him with their canopy of huge green and red leaves.

But it wasn't the plants and trees that drew Tazz here these days. Craning his neck, he stared up at the dome and, through its distorted reflections, he could see a long and colourful space serpent flying round and round the ship against the multicoloured backdrop of the nebula.

"What do you think it's thinking?" a girl's voice said, making him jump. He had thought he was alone, but a girl, about his age, was standing nearby. From the science equipment on the anti-gravity tray that floated beside her, he could see she was studying the serpent.

Tazz had seen this girl before, but he didn't know her name. She was pretty, though, and really smiley. Her parents were scientists here on the *HMS Horizon*, and he often saw her running about and playing tag in the garden with her friends or charging down the corridors of the ship, childish behaviour that had got her into trouble more than once. She seemed quite irresponsible. Tazz, on the other hand, rarely smiled. He was the son of Captain Hanross Galgamore, the ship's captain, so he had to be setting a good example at all times. He had no time for jokes and silly games.

"No idea. I'm not telepathic," he said. The girl looked a little affronted and turned away, muttering something under her breath.

"I beg your pardon?" Tazz said, not willing to let her get away with backchatting him.

“Nothing,” the girl said. “I just...”

“Do you know I am Tazz Galgamore, the son of the ship’s captain?”

“Yes, I...”

“Then don’t backchat me. Get on with your work.” Even as he said it, he knew he didn’t have to be so rude. He was cross with himself, and stood there trying to think of something nice to say, but he couldn’t, and he knew she just thought he was glaring at her.

He turned away and walked towards a huge sculpture in the middle of the garden. It was a sculpture of the *HMS Horizon*, the spaceship they were on. It was a long, flat, roughly leaf-shaped structure. The domed garden was on the top near the back, like a raindrop. The real ship was the size of a small city. Tazz ran his finger over the sculpture’s shiny surface and imagined a giant version of himself standing outside in space looking at the real *HMS Horizon*.

And then, suddenly, everything changed.

The whole ship rocked and the sound of an explosion tore through the air. Looking along the corridor beyond the garden, he saw fire and smoke and people running. More explosions shook the ship. The sculpture toppled sideways to the ground and huge leaves fell from the trees, drifting downwards like manta rays in the tranquil waters of a lagoon.

Through the glass of the dome, he could see more of the space serpents, the huge yet peaceful beasts they had been studying for the last two weeks. But they no longer seemed peaceful. A great tail whipped against the dome and a glass section shattered. Air from the pressurised environment inside the dome began to rush out through the hole. A great wind pulled at the trees and knocked him off his feet. It sucked fire into the garden from the burning corridors of the ship, and trees and bushes went up in flames. The artificial gravity faltered and died, and Tazz found himself becoming weightless. The wind lifted him and carried him towards the hole. He was heading for the frozen vacuum of space, where he would be dead within a minute, and there was nothing to grab onto and nothing he could do.

“Tazz!” came a voice. It was that girl. She was in trouble too, whirling around like a feather in the wind, heading for the hole. Leaves and branches and burning debris whirled

with them. But the girl was not as helpless as Tazz. She was lying flat on her anti-gravity tray, as if it were a surfboard. Its thrusters were not very powerful but gave her some control over her direction. "I'm coming!" she cried through the fire and smoke. Around them, the dome was breaking apart like a balloon bursting in slow motion. The girl steered towards Tazz.

"What are you doing?" he gasped, angry that this girl thought *she* could help *him*. Still, he grabbed hold of the tray.

"Look," she shouted, pointing. In the air, just out of arm's reach, was a box with the word "emergency" on it. The girl steered them towards it. Tazz realised why. He reached out and grabbed it. Clinging to the tray with one hand, he opened the box with the other. He pulled out two black packs. But it was too late: the dome had split open. Everything from the garden was tumbling into space, including Tazz and the girl. They had only seconds to live.