

Star voyagers

At the age of fifteen, Kin Zen had already visited more of the galaxy and seen more planets than most people ever would. He knew he was lucky. The starship *Voyager* was in the third year of its journey to explore the outer galaxy. On board were three thousand, two hundred and eighty people – pilots and other flight crew, scientists, robot specialists, doctors, teachers, soldiers and their families.

Kin's parents were scientists. The purpose of the voyage was to collect and study unknown life forms. One day, Kin wanted to be a scientist too.

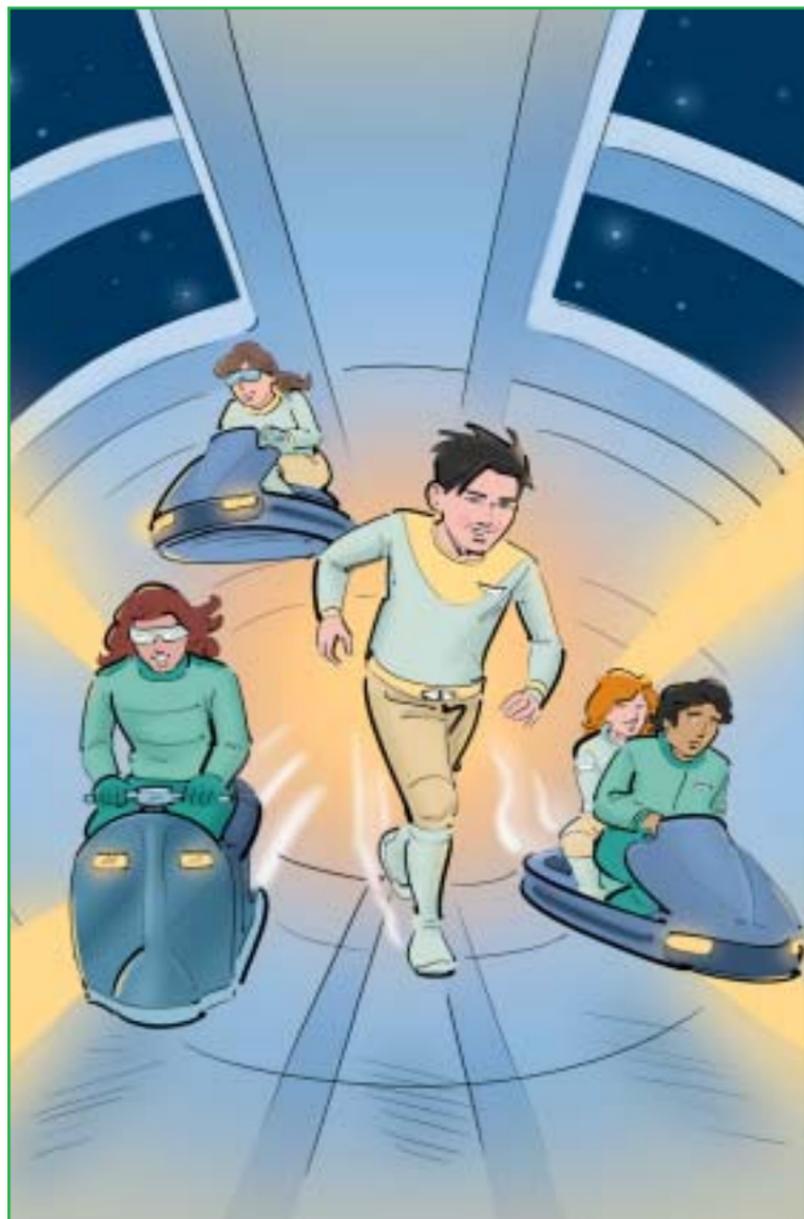
Today Kin was excited. He had great news to tell his best friend Tesa. He ran down a wide passage, taking big jumps in the low gravity. The starship was as big as a small city, and most people used anti-gravity cars to travel from one part of it to another, but the cars were too slow for Kin. Although he was small for his age – people often thought he looked younger – he was quick and strong. Now he was in a hurry.

Kin knew where to find Tesa – in the ship's zoo. They often went there to help the scientists study the creatures that the *Voyager* had collected on its long journey from their home planet, Epsilon.

He found Tesa in front of one of the zoo's cages. She was wearing the uniform of a Class 1 scientist and working with a computer. Tesa was fourteen and in Kin's science and history classes. Although she was younger, she was taller than Kin by several centimetres. She was also the daughter of the starship's captain.

'What's the hurry?' Tesa asked.

Kin didn't answer her question. 'Why are *you* wearing a scientist's uniform?'



Tesa laughed. 'Because I'm clever, that's why. Dastar said I could wear one when I'm helping him.'

Dastar was the chief scientist in charge of the zoo.

'Look.' Tesa pointed to a creature on the other side of the cage's glass-like wall. 'I'm recording the tharmor's behaviour.'

The creature Tesa was studying was one of the latest to be collected. Kin had seen a picture of an animal called an octopus in one of his history books – *Life on the Planet Earth* – and he thought the tharmor looked like one of those. The tharmor, though, had many more tentacles, which it was using to climb a small tree. At the top, it broke off a large pink fruit with one of its tentacles. They watched as the tharmor passed the fruit from tentacle to tentacle until it reached its open mouth, where the fruit disappeared.

'What sort of atmosphere does it have?' asked Kin. He knew that the wall wasn't really glass. It was a force-field that stopped both the octopus-like tharmor and its atmosphere from escaping. The force-field was one-way. Humans and robots could enter, but nothing and no one could escape, unless they had a personal controller to create a door, or someone pushed the emergency field-reverse button.

'It's only two per cent oxygen, so don't go in or you're dead!' Tesa replied. 'So, why the big hurry?'

'I've got something to tell you,' Kin said.

'What? It must be important. You came in so fast.'

'I'm going,' Kin said.

'Going?'

'With one of the landing groups. I've been given permission. When we reach Aldebaran 4, I'll be an observer in one of the exploration teams.' The planet was in the system of the star Aldebaran, eleven thousand light years from Epsilon. It was the last on *Voyager's* journey before returning home.

'But you're not sixteen!' Only those aged sixteen or over could join exploration teams. Younger people were not allowed to leave the ship on unexplored planets.

'My birthday is in three weeks,' Kin said.

'It's not fair! Just because your mother's a team leader.'

Kin gave a big smile. It was true, his mother was an exploration team commander. But Kin had been training for months.

'I'll bring you back a baby moon monkey,' he said. The creature was in one of their sillier computer games.

Tesa gave him a push. 'Stupid Kin monkey!' In the weak gravity, it threw Kin several metres backwards.

He picked himself up, grinning. 'Maybe Dastar will let you study the creatures we bring back.'

'I hope you fall in a hole!' Since she was a child Tesa had been keenly interested in alien life forms, and Kin's jokes made her angry. She knew she wouldn't have a chance to step onto an alien planet before the end of the voyage.

Tesa turned back to look at the tharmor. 'Oh, look what you've made me miss!'

The tharmor's colour was changing. As it ate the pink fruit, it was turning pink too. There were over a hundred different creatures in the zoo. Each one was kept under the same conditions as on its own planet. Temperature, atmosphere and gravity were all controlled. Familiar plants were grown and the correct food was made in the *Voyager's* laboratories. All of the creatures were watched by a twenty-four-hour robot eye, but a human was always better at noticing anything important.

Tesa began recording the tharmor's colour change. Suddenly a voice came over the public communication system.

'This is the captain speaking. All crew to your control positions. Prepare for star speed exit. Begin emergency checks now. Thirty minutes to Aldebaran 4.'

Excitement ran through Kin. Soon he would be stepping onto his first unexplored planet. He suddenly felt nervous. What would they find there?

There was life on Aldebaran 4. The ship's detectors had discovered it – that was the reason they had come. But would it be dangerous? Would they even recognise it? On other planets, they had caught some strange creatures. It was almost impossible to believe how strange some of them were – things from the bottom of acid seas; things that floated high above planets of gas; things from planets with temperatures so low that a human would immediately freeze to death. Yet the ship's scientists had been able to re-create their environments.

The purpose in collecting them was simple. Scientists on Epsilon wanted to understand how creatures could live in environments that were hostile to humans. Thousands of years ago, the planet Earth had been the birthplace of the human race. It had been green and beautiful with a sky you could see through clearly, as if through glass. But four centuries ago, the environment had been destroyed. And people had had to travel to the stars to find a new home. They had found Epsilon. But Epsilon was small, and its star was dying. They needed to be able to live on other planets.

Kin wanted to help gain that important knowledge.

He took Tesa's hand. 'Come on! There's a planet waiting.'