

“There,” reported Patty Perkins. “Skinny one in sight. No cheeks yet.” Bert checked. “No cheeks yet,” he confirmed. “Sad.”

The saucer executed a triple sideways Higginbotham and an upward spiral Treadmill - all tricks mastered by graduates of SCOOOL, of whom Haricot Bert was one of the very best. Patty groaned and stuck his head in the cotton-wool. The manoeuvre took the saucer out of observation orbit and on a gliding path down towards the schoolgirl now innocently walking home.

“Us try HUPLA, eh Patty?” suggested Bert, crunching at an unexpected hazelnut which he had found lodged in his cheek-pouch.

Patty Perkins cheered up. He scuttled over to the observation window. “Easy does, Bert. Right behind her, wham!”

“Wham!” agreed Patty as he brought the saucer to a hovering position just above the girl’s head. “And wham!” he muttered as he engaged the HUPLA (Holistic Unattached Processor for Levitating Aliens).

A beam of purple light shot out from the tiny saucer and smacked the girl on the head. Gleefully the hamsters in the saucer waited for another triumph for Hammy Labs Inc, the manufacturers of HUPLA. It was disappointing: all that happened was that Kats’ (for it was she) hair stood up on end; the girl herself, though annoyed, stayed firmly on the ground. So astonished was Patty Perkins that he slapped his paws on the complex controls and the craft executed a forwards double-flip of which the legendary Red-Eye Radovic would have been proud; the purple beam latched on to an unsuspecting pigeon pottering about in the gutter and the bird was immediately dragged two feet up in the air where it hung and squawked.

With her hair now drifting back down over her ears, Kats looked round annoyed. Seeing no one in the street behind her, she looked up, and saw the hamsters’ saucer jiggling about in WHISKR mode (Wide-band Hamster Inductor for Severe Kinesis Recovery).

“Oh no!” she muttered to herself, “Not them again!” She forced a smile and waved up at the two eager faces peeping out over the rim of the saucer.

Bert piloted the saucer down to rest on the wall next to Kats, and flipped off the lid.

“Greetings, skinny one!” he squeaked. “No pouches yet,” he observed. The words were a little hard to hear, since his own pouches were jammed full of emergency rations.

“Hamsters have pouches,” noted Patty.

Kats ignored these remarks. Hamsters have a lot, but no manners. “And what are you to up to, my friends?”

Bert grinned smugly. “Testing HUPLA,” he said. “Secret weapon to levitate aliens.” He pressed a button on his control-panel and the purple beam vanished; the pigeon fell with a soft plop into the gutter and staggered around severely stressed. “But no good for girls,” he said sadly. “Need more power.”

“Well, never mind,” said Kats, sitting down on the wall beside them, and putting down her school-bag. “What else have you got in there?” She peered into the opened saucer. “Hm, nuts, carrots - and what’s this - broccoli? Tasty!”

“Hamsters have broccoli”.

Bert shoved Patty Perkins to one side, and proudly dragged out another weird device. “BOTTOM”, he announced.

Kats was shocked. “Pardon?” she asked.

“Pardon given,” said Bert.

“Hamsters have BOTTOM,” said Patty.

“Well, I know you have, and big ones generally. But you shouldn’t be going around talking about them like that - it’s rude,” said Kats. She looked closely at the pair. “And if your granny heard you talking like that, she would give you a good talking to...”

Bert looked round terrified. Patty’s teeth chattered: “Hannies h-h-have g-g-gramsters,” he muttered.

Kats stroked their heads until they felt calm again. Haricot Bert polished his nose. Then he showed Kats the instrument. “This BOTTOM,” he said, “Bionic Organic Tricorder. Takes pictures.”

“Oh how interesting, just like in Star Trek,” said Kats, impressed. “Can I look through it?”

“Oh no,” said Patty firmly, “Girls not allowed. People with fat cheeks only.”

Kats was disappointed. “Bionic Organic Tricorder - that’s only BOT. What about the TOM?”

“Technology of Outstanding Magnificence,” announced Patty proudly. “Hamsters have Technology of Outstanding Magnificence. Better than skinny aliens,” he said firmly, before giving his fur a good clean.

“Well, your HUPLA didn’t seem to work very well,” replied Kats, poking Patty. “Not very magnificent, if you know what I mean. Could just lift a silly old pigeon, but couldn’t lift a skinny alien, now, could it?”

Bert put away his BOTTOM and sighed. “No, you right. HUPLA not powerful enough. Needs more food.”

“Food?” asked Kats, puzzled. “What food?”

“See. We shovels food in here - “ he indicated a drawer in the control panel - “the levitating beam comes out here,” he indicated a spout on the outside of the saucer. “More food in, more beam out.”

“Impressive,” said Kats, not in the least convinced. “What kind of food?”

“Yoghurt drops, crunchy nibbles, sunflower seeds,” Patty counted them off on the fingers of his front paws, “Chocolate drops, and a little bit of apple.”

Kats thought about it for a while. “Why don’t we try some different kinds of food. These ones seem a little lacking in - well, you know, *windpower*.”

“Windpower?” asked Bert, now lost. “What mean, windpower?”

“Hamsters have windpower,” confirmed Patty, consuming a piece of apple far too big for him.

“Well,” said Kats, “Some foods have real windpower, and maybe that’s what your wonderful invention needs for the larger aliens. Look, I’ll nip home and see what I can find.” She dashed home, leaving Patty Perkins and Haricot Bert to a snooze and a welcome snack.

After a few minutes, Kats returned with a bag. “Now look in here,” she said, “Brussels Sprouts, Cabbage, and I’ve got some beans here. These ought to do something.”

Bert looked at them dubiously. He nibbled at a Brussels Sprout. “Nice,” he said.

“Yes,” said Kats, “But not for you - for your HUPLA. Now get on with it.” She watched as Bert and Patty shovelled the windpower food alternately into themselves and into the drawer for the HUPLA. At last, both their pouches and the drawer were full to bursting.

“Mbmbfffb?” asked Patty.

“Mmmml!” acknowledged Bert.

Patty pressed the button. The purple beam shot out with a noise like a released balloon (or worse) and hit a small car which was driving past at that moment. One of those small cars driven with great care by an old lady who could barely see over the steering wheel and who was determined that nobody doing more than 25 mph should overtake her.

Pang! The small car was lifted bodily ten feet into the air. Patty expertly worked the slider bars on the controls and the car moved back up the street at its new height. Gently, he put it down again.

The old lady drove on determinedly, eyes just above the steering-wheel; she had not noticed a thing.

“Wow,” said Bert.

“Hamsters have Outstanding Technology,” boasted Patty.

“Wham,” said Bert, as he released another burst at the old lady’s car again, just as it reached the same point on the street as before. As before, the car was replaced some thirty metres back, and as before she drove on, grimly and oblivious.

“Hamsters have wham,” confirmed Patty. “Oops,” said Patty as he made a rather unfortunate noise. “Windpower.”

Kats was pleased. “Now you’ve got a working HUPLA,” she said. “But you be careful with it - no accidents!”

Bert bowed low. “Skinny girl helps. Hamsters no hurt aliens, hamsters just want to have fun.”

“Hamsters have fun,” muttered Patty, as he lifted the old lady’s car a third time. “Oops,” he added. “Windpower.”

“Oops,” said Bert, as the Brussels Sprouts got to work, “Pardon.”

Kats shouldered her school-bag once more and left them to it.