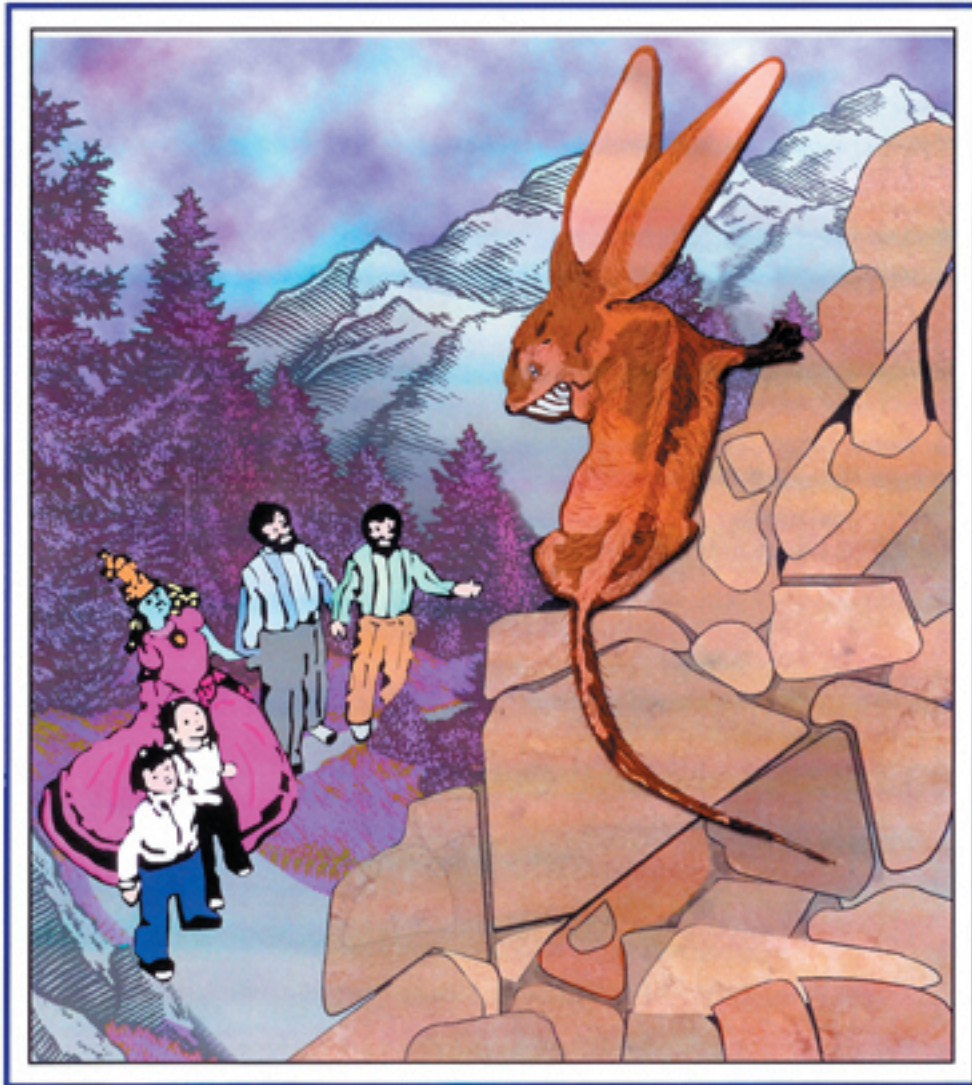


# The Creatures of Zoon







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Alan M. Hofmeister

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Alan Hofmeister, author

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# Chapter 1:

## A Call from Space

Maria-Luisa and Jim Donn watched as the snake silently threaded its way through the jungle leaves. When it was about a foot from the sleeping man, the snake pulled back. It coiled and prepared to strike.

"That man is in terrible trouble," exclaimed Maria-Luisa. "Do you think he can escape?"

Jim lurched forward. "I don't think he can."

Just then, the television picture went blank, and the sound stopped.

"Hey, what's happening?" yelled Jim, jumping up and grabbing the remote control. "What a horrible time for the TV to go out."

While Jim pushed buttons on the remote control, Maria-Luisa headed out the door.

"I'm going to check the antenna," she said. "It's possible that something's wrong with it."

Maria-Luisa reached the antenna and began to adjust it.

"Yell if the signal comes back," she shouted.

"Okay," Jim called back.

Maria-Luisa turned the antenna to point in several different directions, but the picture and sound did not return.

"It's not any better," Jim shouted. "The trouble must be in the TV. Come back inside."

As Maria-Luisa was turning to leave, she bumped into the antenna and knocked it onto its side.

"Hey," called Jim from below, "I have a picture!"

"That's strange," said Maria-Luisa. "I just knocked the antenna over. I'm surprised the TV is showing anything at all."

"The picture is fuzzy, but it's better than nothing," said Jim. "Come in and look at it now."

Maria-Luisa returned to the TV room.

"That doesn't look like the channel we were watching," she said, peering closely at the picture. "What happened to the snake?"



There was no snake and no jungle. They could only vaguely recognize a hazy picture of a man standing in a dark cave. The man, who was wearing a silver suit, was saying something; but the sound was very weak.



“Turn up the sound,” said Jim. “We need to hear what he’s saying.”

Maria-Luisa adjusted the sound level.

“Mayday! Mayday!” the man declared. “This is Doctor Henry Lee speaking. My assistant and I have been trapped by a huge avalanche. We are locked inside Pyramid Mountain on the planet Zoon. Repeat--we are trapped by an avalanche . . .”

“The planet Zoon!” said Jim. “Good grief!”

“Our antenna must be pointing in exactly the right direction,” said Maria-Luisa excitedly. “Let’s listen to what he’s saying.”

“If anyone hears this message, please send help,” Dr. Lee went on. “I don’t know how much longer we can . . .”

Again, the screen went blank. Jim pressed all the buttons on the remote control, but neither picture nor sound returned.

“The broadcast system they’re using must be very weak,” said Jim. “We were lucky to see anything at all. Our antenna must’ve been pointing toward Zoon.”

“Poor Dr. Lee,” said Maria-Luisa. “He’s in terrible trouble.”

“Let’s send an e-mail to the space center,” said Jim. He rushed to the computer and sent a message. His e-mail read . . .

Send	Save Draft	Spell Check	Cancel
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Insert addresses from **Addresses** or enter **Names** (seperate by commas)

**To:**  **Cc:**

**Subject:**  **Bcc:**

☐ Send via Delivery.com ☐ Save copy to folder

Director of the Space Center:

Dr. Henry Lee and his assistant are trapped inside Pyramid Mountain on the planet Zoon. He needs your help quickly. Can you send a rescue ship at once?

Please let us know if we can help.

Maria-Luisa and Jim Donn

☐ Use Signature ☐ plain text ☐ html tags allowed html preview

**Attachments:** (None) Edit Attachments

“What if they don't believe our e-mail?” questioned Maria-Luisa. “Let's go to the space center. When we tell them what we saw, I'm sure they'll send a rescue craft to Zoon, immediately. Dr. Lee's one of their top scientists.”

“That's a good idea,” said Jim. “Let's go.”

# Chapter 2:

## The Space Center

The space center was not far from where Maria-Luisa and Jim lived. In fact, it was only a short bus ride. When the bus reached the Space Center stop, they immediately saw a large, clearly-marked sign, which read . . .



Maria-Luisa and Jim followed the arrow. It pointed the way to a gate outside the space center. At the gate a guard in a blue suit stopped them.

“Do you have a pass?” he asked sharply.

“No, we don’t have a pass, but we desperately need to speak to the director of the space center,” said Maria-Luisa. “We received a call for help from Dr. Lee.”

“Dr. Lee?” said the guard. “That’s not possible. He’s on the planet Zoon.”

“We know,” said Jim. “That’s what he said in his message. Please, let us see the director.”

“I can’t permit you to see Dr. Sharma,” said the guard.

“We didn’t make up the story,” begged Maria-Luisa. “Dr. Lee is in great danger. He needs help quickly.”

While Maria-Luisa was pleading with the guard, a distinguished man in a gray suit appeared from inside the space center. He heard Maria-Luisa’s frantic plea and stopped to listen.

“What’s this about Dr. Lee?” he asked.

“Good morning, Dr. Sharma,” said the guard. “You need not be bothered with this. These children have made up a story claiming that they heard a call for help from Dr. Lee!”

“Dr. Sharma, you’re the man we need to see,” said Jim. “You must help Dr. Lee. He appeared on our television screen. He and his assistant are trapped inside a mountain on Zoon.”

Dr. Sharma smiled. "It's true that Dr. Lee is on Zoon now; that's been in the newspapers," he said. "I doubt that you'd be able to receive his broadcast on your TV. The signal he can send out is very directional."

"Our antenna fell over," said Maria-Luisa. "It must have been pointing directly at Zoon and picking up Dr. Lee's cry for help. Please send a ship to rescue him."

"There is a cargo ship leaving for Zoon tonight," said Dr. Sharma. "It doesn't carry people--only food and supplies for Dr. Lee and his assistant."

"Well, can't you also send people on the ship?" said Jim. "Dr. Lee doesn't have much time."

"Yes, we can, but we can't send a rescue team unless we hear directly from Dr. Lee, himself," said Dr. Sharma. "We can't send people halfway across the galaxy without real evidence of danger. Frankly, I think your story is absurd."

"Go home," said the guard. "Dr. Sharma's a busy man. You've already taken too much of his time."

"Please understand, there's nothing more I can do at this point," said Dr. Sharma.

Jim scowled up at Dr. Sharma. "You know, you've just ended all hope of ever getting Dr. Lee out of that mountain alive."

Jim and Maria-Luisa started for home. They walked in silence along the fence that enclosed the space center. On the other side of the fence, they could see many large, powerful space vehicles. The craft were lined up, waiting to be launched. People were loading instruments and supplies aboard each ship.

"Those poor scientists," said Jim sadly. "Can't we find a way to help them?"

"It may be that we can," said Maria-Luisa. "I've been thinking."

"What have you been thinking?" asked Jim curiously.

"Well," said Maria-Luisa, "how would you like to visit Zoon?"

"Visit Zoon?" he said, with awe.

"Well," said Maria-Luisa, "it's up to us to save Dr. Lee. It doesn't appear that anyone believes our story. Do you think we could ride on the supply ship that leaves for Zoon tonight?"

"Dr. Sharma will never let us aboard that ship," said Jim.

"That's true! So, we can't let anyone know what we're doing," said Maria-Luisa. "My plan is to hide inside one of the supply crates before it's placed aboard."

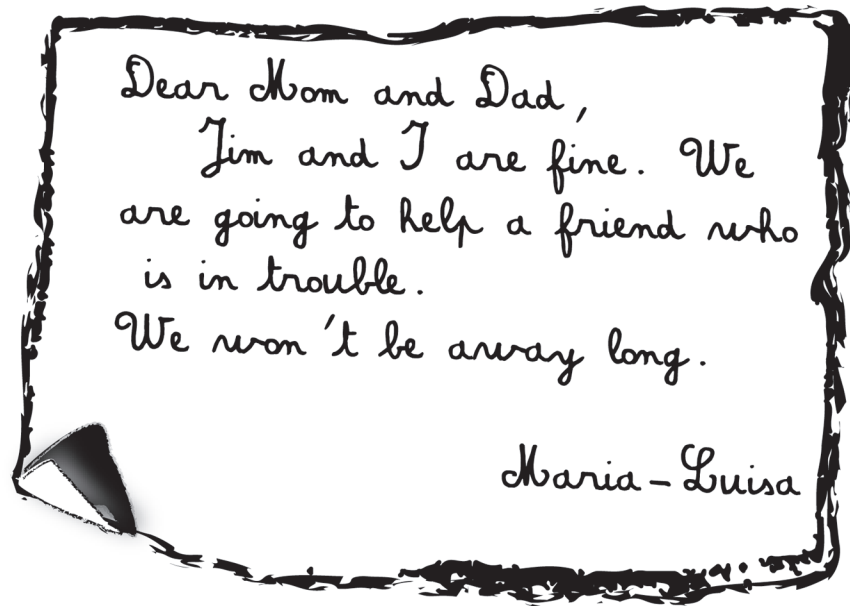
"I don't know," stammered Jim. "That sounds awfully dangerous."

"Think of Dr. Lee and his assistant trapped inside that mountain," said Maria-Luisa. "If we don't get them out, they'll starve, or worse, suffocate."



"Yes," agreed Jim, "it's up to us. Let's leave word for Mom and Dad to let them know we're okay, otherwise they'll try to stop us."

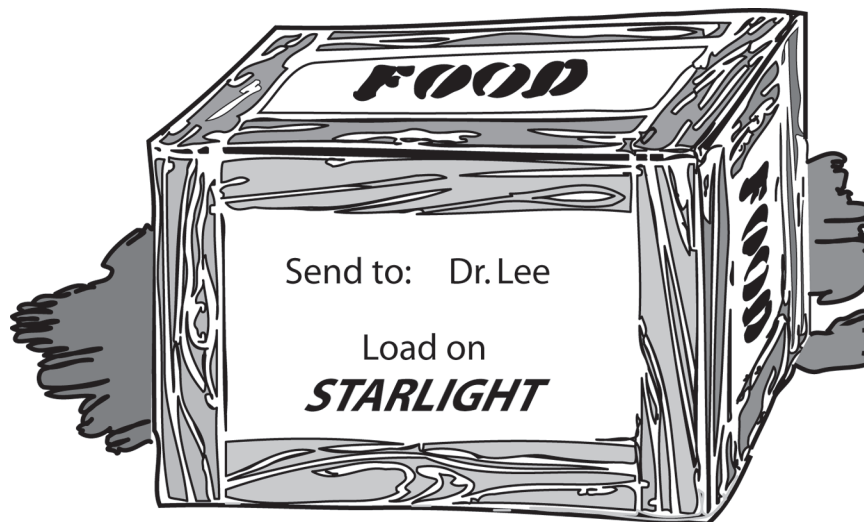
Maria-Luisa found a small piece of paper in her pocket. She quickly scribbled a note:



After Maria-Luisa wrote her parents' names on the paper, she and Jim rode the bus home and quietly slipped their note under the windshield wiper of the family car.

"Now, we must hurry," said Jim. "Let's find which spacecraft is going to Zoon."

Maria-Luisa and Jim circled the space center until they spotted a pile of crates that were intended for the scientists on Zoon.



“We’ve found our ticket to Zoon,” said Jim, “and it’s on the *Starlight*. Let’s climb into a box before someone sees us.”

Jim and Maria-Luisa jumped over the fence and ripped open one of the crates. It was half full of food packages.

“This crate looks big enough for both of us,” said Maria-Luisa. “Hurry, let’s crawl inside.”

Jim climbed into the crate with Maria-Luisa. Then he closed the lid. After several minutes a loader picked up the heavy crate.

“Here we go,” whispered Maria-Luisa.

“Yep, here we go,” shuddered Jim. “Our next stop is Zoon.”

# Chapter 3:

## On Board the *Starlight*

Fire and thick smoke shot from the rocket engines of the spacecraft *Starlight*. The roar and shudder of the engines gave Maria-Luisa a headache.

"I hope this ship gets off the ground before those engines shake us apart," shouted Jim.

The *Starlight* slowly began to lift off. It hovered uneasily on its giant tail of fire, then, with new strength, shot into the air. Quickly, it was out of sight, lost among the shining stars in the sky.

When the ship was far from Earth, Maria-Luisa and Jim cautiously climbed out of their crate.

"Wow, we're headed for Zoon," said Jim, carefully feeling the rough floor beneath his feet. The floor felt sticky, as if it were made of glue; it seemed to grab his shoes to keep him from floating.

Maria-Luisa, after exploring the cabin, found a seat under a small round window; she peered out. The sky was filled with millions of shining stars. Far behind them, Earth was becoming smaller and smaller. The spaceship *Starflight* increased speed and shot past the moon at the speed of light. Maria-Luisa gazed longingly out the window.

"It's so lonely here," she said. "We're very far from home."

"I'm frightened, too," said Jim. "I've never been more than a hundred miles from our hometown. Home must be at least a million miles away."

The ship moved through space. It passed other planets; some had more than one moon. It passed bits of rock and fire-torn stars. On it raced toward the planet Zoon.

Maria-Luisa and Jim felt that space must be endless. They hungrily ate from the food packages in the crate. After traveling for a time at light-speed, the *Starlight* approached Zoon. "What do you think we'll find there?" asked Maria-Luisa, moving from porthole to porthole. "Zoon is a very mysterious planet."

"If we find creatures on Zoon, I hope they're friendly," said Jim. "Prepare for landing."

After circling the planet once, the *Starlight's* retro-engines fired, and the ship began to descend. It seemed to rest on its tail of fire as it settled gently onto the surface of the planet.

As soon as the *Starlight* touched down, Jim and Maria-Luisa looked out through a porthole. They had landed near a forest of purple trees. A river, full of silver water, snaked its way through the forest. The sky was blue, like Earth's sky, but all the clouds were bright red. Jim checked the external atmosphere-quality sensor.

"The air is the same as that of Earth," said Jim. "We won't need any . . ."

Suddenly, Jim stopped. "Look," he whispered, pointing to some rocks at the edge of the forest. "What's that?"

Maria-Luisa looked at the rocks. Her mouth fell open as she felt flashes of fear.

"It's . . . it's a two-headed monster!" shouted Maria-Luisa. "It's coming our way."

From behind the rocks came a strange-looking creature. It was about the size of a bear; and, like a bear, it could walk on its back feet. However, it was very strange, because it had two heads. One head was bright blue and one was bright red.

The creature boldly approached the spaceship and banged on the side.

"Who's in there?" roared the red head.

"Come out!" bellowed the blue head.

"What should we do?" whispered Jim. "We're trapped inside this ship."

"Please come out," said the red head.

"Yes, please do," begged the blue head. "I won't hurt you."

"We must face them . . . I mean we must face it," said Maria-Luisa. "We can't let a two-headed monster trap us inside. We must find Pyramid Mountain and try to rescue the scientists."

"What if it's merely pretending to be friendly?" said Jim. "It could grab us the instant we step outside."

"We have to take that chance," said Maria-Luisa, moving toward the ladder. "Let's go. We have no time to waste!"

# Chapter 4:

## The Two-Headed Monster

Maria-Luisa and Jim trembled in the open doorway and stared fearfully at the two-headed creature.

"It looks awfully mean," gasped Jim. "I don't want to go out there!"

"I'm not mean," said the creature's blue head. "Come out. I won't hurt you."

Jim and Maria-Luisa didn't move.

"How did you hear what I was saying?" asked Jim, with wide eyes. "I was whispering."

"Hearing is much easier when you have four ears," said the creature's red head.

"Please come out. I'm really quite friendly."

The two, young, new arrivals to Zoon slowly climbed down from the vehicle.

"You terrified us," said Maria-Luisa. "We've never seen a two-headed creature before."

"Well, you look very strange to me too," it said. "Did you travel a great distance?"

"We're from planet Earth," said Jim. "We've traveled to Zoon to help someone who's in trouble. He and his assistant are trapped inside a mountain by an immense avalanche."

"That's terrible!" said the red head. "What's his name?"

"Dr. Lee," said Maria-Luisa.

"Oh yes, I've heard of Dr. Lee," said the blue head. "I believe his assistant's name is Big Al."

"I think you're wrong," said the red head. "His assistant's name is Moose."

"No, his name is Big Al," said the blue head. "I'm sure of it."

"I'm sure it's Moose," said the red head.

"Big Al!" shouted the blue head.

"Moose!" screamed the red head.

"Please, please," begged Maria-Luisa. "We didn't mean to start a quarrel. Calm yourself, . . . or yourselves."

The blue head gave the red head a fierce look. "We'll settle this later," it said.

"Yes, we will," said the red head.

"Please stop," said Jim. "We must hurry. Do you know the way to Pyramid Mountain?"

"Of course," said the blue head. "It's directly south of here--about ten gadells."



"No, it's not," said the red head sharply. "It's north--about twelve gadells. I know it's north."

"You must not know much about direction," said the blue head. "Everyone knows Pyramid Mountain is south. It's south, I say!"

Jim tried to interrupt, "What's a 'gadell'?" The two-headed beast paid no attention to him.

"It's north!" screamed the red head.

"It's south!" shouted the blue head.

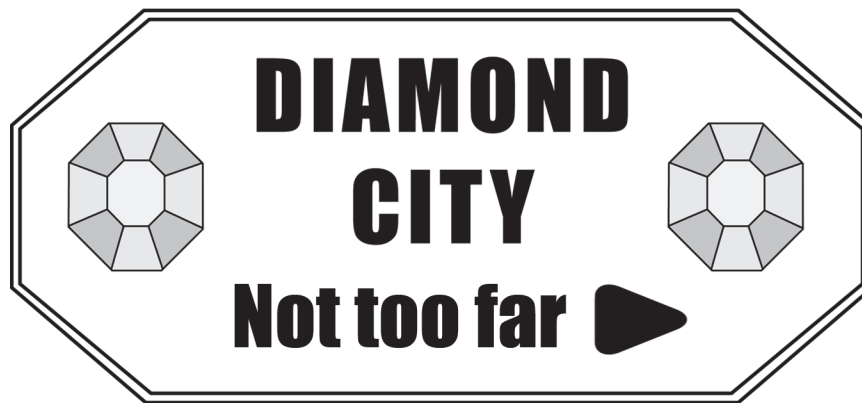
While the two-headed creature yelled at itself, Jim and Maria-Luisa fearfully backed away.

"Let's find help elsewhere," said Jim. "Those two heads can't agree on anything."

The two-headed creature was so busy shouting at itself, it didn't notice when Jim and Maria-Luisa turned and walked away.



After walking a great distance, Jim and Maria-Luisa waded across a river of silver water. On the other side of the river, they found a narrow road. Beside the road was a sign.



“We should have better luck in Diamond City,” said Maria-Luisa. “Someone there must know the way to Pyramid Mountain.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Jim, as he quickly turned to jog down the road. “Hurry! We must rescue the scientists from that mountain.”

Maria-Luisa and Jim followed the road through some low, pleasant hills. Finally, the road opened up onto a large, grassy plain. On the other side of the plain was a group of buildings called Diamond City. The city was so beautiful it nearly took their breath away.

“Golly,” said Jim, with amazement. “The entire city is made of diamonds!”

Indeed, it was. There were whole diamond houses and whole diamond shops. The streets were paved with diamonds, and the cars shimmered with diamond parts.

“Wow,” said Maria-Luisa, as they entered the city. “I never saw anything like this on Earth.”

Maria-Luisa was so intent upon looking at the town, she failed to look where she was going. Suddenly, she banged into the resident diamond sweeper.

“I’m so sorry,” said Maria-Luisa. “I was paying more attention to the diamonds than to where I was going.”

“That’s quite all right,” said the man. “Are you new here?”

“Yes, we are,” replied Jim. “We’re looking for someone who can direct us to Pyramid Mountain.”

“If you need directions, the person to see is Czarina Happy,” said the sweeper-man. “She’s in charge of our town.”

"Where can we find her?" asked Maria-Luisa.

"She lives in the diamond castle at the end of the street," said the man. "She'll be more than happy to help you."

"Thanks," said Jim, heading for the castle.

"Enjoy your visit with Czarina Happy," shouted the man.

Maria-Luisa and Jim hurried to the diamond castle. The huge front door was closed, so Jim knocked timidly.

"Who's there!" roared a voice from behind the door. "Why are you bothering me?"

"We've come to see Czarina Happy," said Maria-Luisa. "We need help."

"Well, I'm Czarina Happy," thundered the voice, "and I have no time to help you!"

"Czarina Happy doesn't sound so happy," said Jim. "Let's come back later."

At that moment the huge door opened.

"Run!" shouted Jim. "She's coming after us."

Jim and Maria-Luisa tried to run; but before they could take a step, Jim felt a hand on his right shoulder, and Maria-Luisa felt a hand on her left shoulder. The strangest thing about the two hands was that they were blue!

"Now I've got you," snarled the Czarina. "I'll teach you strangers to bother me!"

# Chapter 5:

## Czarina Happy

Czarina Happy kept a firm grip and spun the two visitors around.

"Now!" she barked, as her eyes glared down at them from her angry, blue face.

"What's the meaning of knocking on my door?"

Jim was shaking so badly, he could hardly speak. "We're very sorry," he said, fearful of looking up. "We didn't mean to bother you."

"Well, bother me you did!" said Czarina Happy. "Your punishment is one hundred years of hard labor in my diamond mines."

"One hundred years!" exclaimed Jim. "Oh no, please don't send us to your mines. If you let us go, we'll never bother you again," pleaded Jim.

"It's one hundred years of hard labor in the diamond mines," said the Czarina. "Furthermore, if you cause any more trouble, I'll send you to the mines for life!"

As she listened to the conversation, Maria-Luisa became angrier. Finally, she could tolerate it no longer.

"What's wrong with you?" she shouted. "All we did was to knock on your door, and you threaten us with a lifetime in your mines! Why, you're a terrible Czarina. I think your name should be The Unhappy Czarina."

Maria-Luisa's words surprised the Czarina. For a moment she stared at Maria-Luisa with her blue mouth open. She was speechless. Then, she frowned, shut her eyes, and began to cry loudly.

"You're right. I'm a terrible Czarina," she sobbed, sinking to the porch and putting her head in her hands. "I'm mean and cross to everyone, but what can I do? The town is about to be destroyed. Even I am powerless to do anything about it."

"So, that's why you're so unhappy," said Jim.

"That's it exactly," said Czarina Happy. "Before the rock rats came down from the mountains, I was the happiest person in the empire."

"Rock rats?" said Maria-Luisa. "What are they?"

"You haven't heard of the rock rats?" said the Czarina. "I gather that you are not from our planet."

"We're from planet Earth," said Jim.

"That explains it." The Czarina shook her head. "Then I'd better tell you the whole story."

"Please do," said Jim.

The Czarina frowned. "Where should I begin?" she wondered. "There's so much to tell."  
"Begin at the beginning," prompted Maria-Luisa.

"That's a good idea," said Czarina Happy.

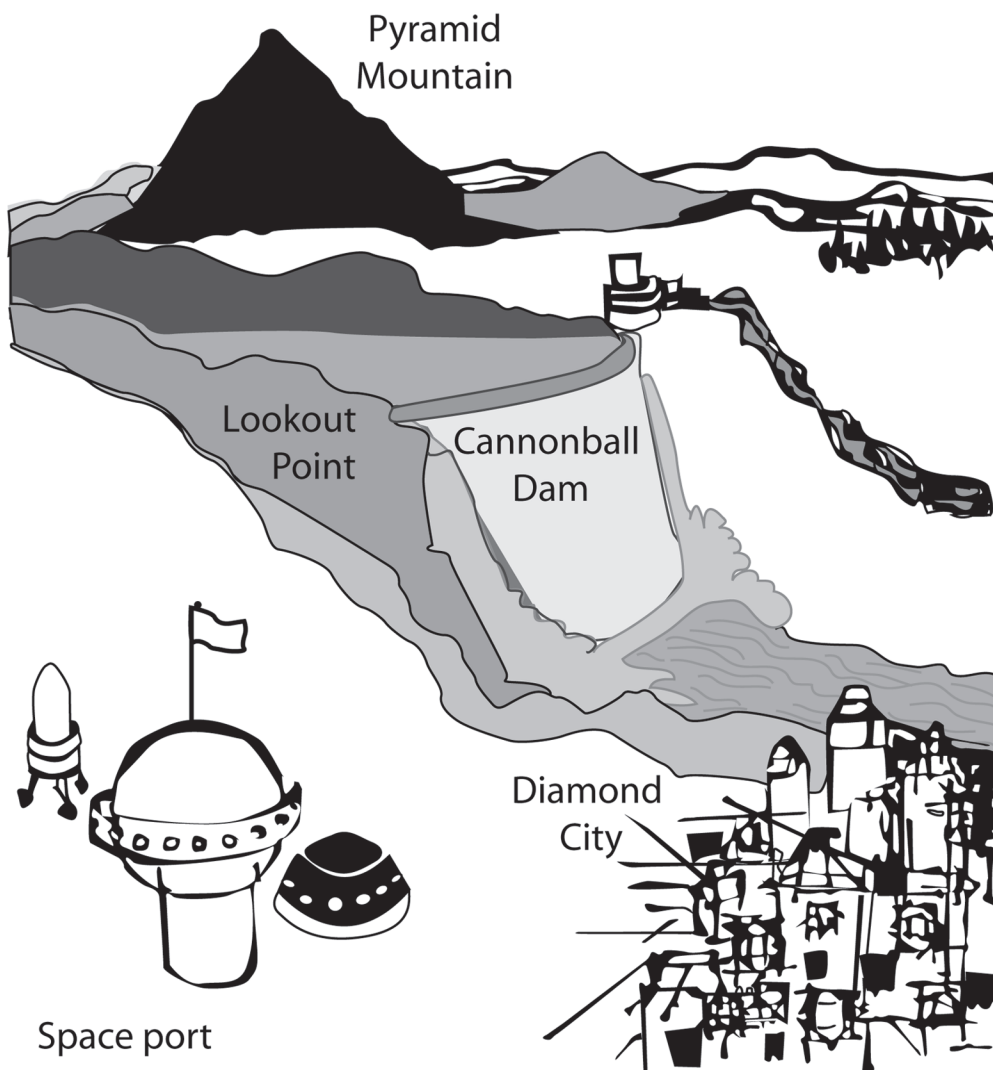
The three went inside Diamond Castle, and the Czarina began her story. "In the beginning, all the rock rats lived in the mountains. As you have probably guessed, the rock rats enjoy eating rock. There's nothing a rock rat likes better than a dusty boulder or a bowl of plaster soup. It sounds disgusting, but that's the way rock rats are."

"One day, they left the mountains and headed for the plains. They ate every rock in their path--and quite a few houses, too. They'd have eaten my city if it hadn't been made of diamonds."

"If they can't eat the city, what's the problem?" asked Maria-Luisa.

"I'll show you the problem. Look at this map of Zoon," said Czarina Happy, pointing to the map on the wall.

Jim and Maria-Luisa studied the large map.





"Diamond City is here," said the Czarina, pointing to a huge, shiny diamond on the map. "Above the city is Cannonball Dam, and high above the dam is Pyramid Mountain. Now, the problem is that the rats have started to eat Cannonball Dam. It's the biggest dam in the empire. If they eat through it, all of Diamond City will be washed away. We've tried to stop them, but nothing works. Our beautiful city is doomed!"

"How much longer do you think the dam can hold?" asked Maria-Luisa.

"No one can estimate that," said the Czarina. "It could be a month; it could be tomorrow."

"What about nudging the rats off the side of the dam with sticks?" said Jim.

"Impossible," said the Czarina. "Once a rock rat sinks its teeth into a rock, the rock is doomed. Those rascals are as tough as the rocks they eat. No, I'm afraid sticks won't work. However, I'm willing to listen to other ideas you might have. I'd be thankful for any aid you could give me in stopping them."

"I wish we could help you," said Jim, "but we need assistance ourselves."

"Oh, what kind of assistance?" asked Czarina Happy.

"We've come to rescue Dr. Henry Lee and his assistant from Pyramid Mountain," said Maria-Luisa.

The Czarina shook her head. "Yes, I know about Dr. Lee," she said. "We picked up his broadcasts shortly after they were trapped."

"Has anyone tried to save them?" asked Jim.

"Of course! We've made every effort to rescue them," said the Czarina, "but they're trapped too far inside the mountain. We simply don't have powerful enough machines to reach them. We're counting on Dr. Sharma to send drills that are powerful enough to dig to the center of the mountain."

"That's bad news. Dr. Sharma isn't able to help," said Maria-Luisa. "Dr. Lee and his assistant don't have much time left. They must be low on food and air. Will you give us permission to try to save them?"

"Of course, although I don't know what you can do to save them," said Czarina Happy. "I'd be glad to give you a ride to the mountain. It's near Cannonball Dam."

"That's great!" said Jim.

"Fine," said Czarina Happy, "we can get fresh supplies here at Diamond Castle before we leave."

"We must save Dr. Lee and his assistant," said Maria-Luisa. "We could be their last hope."



# Chapter 6:

## The Rock Rats at Cannonball Dam

A short time later, Maria-Luisa and Jim climbed into the Czarina's diamond car. The Czarina was at the wheel. They headed for Cannonball Dam. The dam was located on a high ridge above the town. To get there, the Czarina was forced to drive up a long road that wound through the countryside. Along the way they passed many farmhouses. The houses made of wood were still standing, but the houses made of stone were in ruins. At one of the destroyed houses, the Czarina stopped the car and everyone got out.

"When did this happen?" the Czarina asked a portly man with a long beard.

"It was a few days ago," said the unhappy man. He was standing on what was remaining of his porch. "The rock rats stopped here on their way to the dam. My house was their lunch."

"This is tragic," said the Czarina, sadly.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" asked the man, as he began to sob. "It took me years to build this house. The rock rats destroyed it in hours."

"I understand your sorrow. It took years to build Cannonball Dam also," said the Czarina. "That, too, may be destroyed by their chomping and chewing. We just don't know how to stop them."

"Please help us," said the man, wiping his eyes with his long beard. "Those rock rats are destroying everything within a hundred miles of Diamond City."

"We're trying," said the Czarina, patting his shoulder and returning to the car.

With everyone back in the car, they continued their journey to Pyramid Mountain.

"Now you understand why I'm so unhappy," said the Czarina. "As Czarina of the land, I'm supposed to take care of all people who live in this country; and as you see, I'm doing a very poor job."

"It's not your fault," said Maria-Luisa. "You're doing all you can."

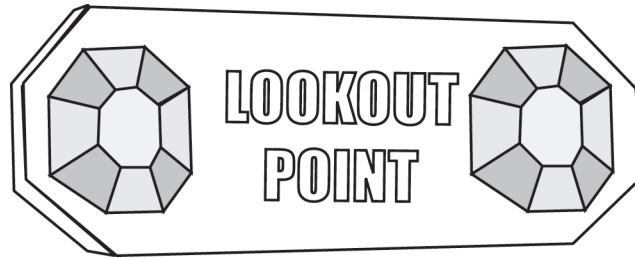
"Perhaps," said the Czarina, "but I'm not doing enough."

As the car rounded the last sharp curve in the mountains, Jim and Maria-Luisa were able to see Cannonball Dam. It was a huge rock pile covered by a thin layer of white plaster. Behind the dam was Cannonball Lake, and far below the dam was Diamond City.

The Czarina stopped the car and everyone got out.

"It's a beautiful dam," said Jim.

"It won't be beautiful for long," said the Czarina, getting out of the car. "Follow me. I want to show you something."



Maria-Luisa and Jim walked with the Czarina to a spot on the ridge that overlooked the dam.

"Look at all of the holes the rock rats are chewing in the dam," said the Czarina. "They're destroying it."

The face of the dam was alive with hundreds of rock rats. They were furry, little creatures that had the bodies of rats, the ears of rabbits, and the teeth of horses. Some of the rats had their teeth locked onto rocks. Others were moving about, looking for a tasty stone. Still others, their stomachs full, rested among the rocks.

"They appear to like the layers of plaster best," said the Czarina. "We think that's the reason they came here."

"It just shouldn't be that difficult to drive them away," said Jim, picking up a rock. "This rock will startle them."

Jim wound up and threw a rock the size of a baseball. The rock whistled through the air. It was headed for a spot several yards from one of the rats. Just before the rock landed, the rock rat turned around, jumped, and caught the rock in its teeth. Within two quick bites, it consumed the rock. Then, the rat wiped its mouth and looked expectantly at Jim. It was begging for more!

"I've never seen anything like it!" said Jim, throwing his arms up in the air. "It liked the rock!"

"I told you they're tough little rascals," said the Czarina. "They don't scare easily."

Just then, a man wearing a red suit with gold buttons ran up to the Czarina.

"Czarina, please pardon me," he said, "but I just received some information that is meant for you. May I interrupt you?"



"Yes, of course you may interrupt," said the Czarina. "What is it?"

"Well," said the man, "we just heard from Dr. Lee. He appeared on our receiver again."

Maria-Luisa's eyes lit up. "That mean's they're still alive," she said.

"That's good news!" said Jim.

"Not really," said the man. "He said that he and his assistant, Big Al, had run out of food and water. They sent the pictures to deliver a final goodbye."

"Oh no," said Jim, "Let's go. We'll worry about the rock rats after we rescue Dr. Lee and Big Al."

"Pyramid Mountain is on the other side of the lake. We can walk to it quickly from here," said the Czarina. "I'll go with you. Try to think of a rescue plan."

# Chapter 7:

## The Plaster Plan

Czarina Happy, Jim, and Maria-Luisa hiked along the rocky trail to Pyramid Mountain. Soon, they reached the mountain and saw the remains of the avalanche that trapped Dr. Lee and his assistant, Big Al. Piles of huge boulders lay on the mountain like driftwood following a flood. It was a terrible sight. Maria-Luisa and Jim realized immediately that they wouldn't be able to move even one of the giant rocks.

"You see," said Czarina Happy, noting Maria-Luisa's sad face. "It's really hopeless. The avalanche has turned the cave into a tomb."

Jim shook his head and sat down on a boulder. Maria-Luisa sat down on another boulder, and Czarina Happy sat down between them. They sat in silence, mourning poor Dr. Lee and Big Al.

"If only we could tunnel in," said Jim after a while. "If only we could open a space big enough to slip them some food."

What Jim said caused Maria-Luisa to think. At first, the thoughts tumbled around in her mind like clothes in a dryer. Then, suddenly, everything came together.

"Jim, you've got it!" she shouted, jumping to her feet. "What a wonderful plan!"

"What plan?" said Jim, looking at Czarina Happy, who also didn't appear to know what Maria-Luisa was referring to.

"Why, I mean your plan to tunnel into the mountain," said Maria-Luisa. "It's a great idea!"

"I don't get it. What's so great about it?" said Jim. "It can't be done."

"I don't understand either," said Czarina Happy.

Maria-Luisa motioned to her two, confused companions. "Come with me. We're going back to the dam. I'll tell you about it on the way. There's work to be done!"

Jim and the Czarina suddenly found themselves racing back to Cannonball Dam, not knowing what they were doing.

"Now, if you don't mind," said the Czarina as she puffed along behind, "would you please explain?"

"We're going to free Dr. Lee and Big Al," shouted Maria-Luisa over her shoulder, "and we're going to save Diamond City and the dam while we're at it."

"Are you joking?" said Jim, very nearly out of breath from the hard run. "How do you plan to do that?"

"I'm not joking," said Maria-Luisa. "We're going to get the rock rats to tunnel into Pyramid Mountain and save the scientists."

"I'd like to see you convince one of those rats to leave the dam," said Czarina Happy, as they reached Cannonball Dam. "They're not easily tricked."

Maria-Luisa sat down for a second to catch her breath. "I don't plan to try to talk to them," she said. "They'll simply get a choice of diets. They can either eat this old rock dam with its thin layer of plaster, or they can have whole sacks of plaster. You did say that they prefer plaster?"

"Yes, that seems to be the case," said Czarina Happy.

"We must get some sacks of fresh plaster," Maria-Luisa said. "We can make a trail of plaster to lead the rock rats to Pyramid Mountain. When we get to the mountain, we can toss the rest of the plaster between the cracks in the rocks. The rock rats will chew through those rocks when they try to reach the plaster."

"It's certainly worth a try," said Jim. "Czarina, where can we get some plaster?"

"There should be plenty of plaster in the shed at the top of the dam," said the Czarina. "We make tons of it so that we can put a smooth surface on the dam."

"Let's go," said Maria-Luisa, starting across the top of the dam. "Every second counts."

Czarina Happy was able to enlist about thirty people. Each person grabbed a sack full of plaster. The rescue party opened a few of the sacks to attract the attention of the rock rats. At first, the rock rats didn't notice the plaster. Finally, one of them sniffed it. He made a high-pitched squeak. Soon, every rock rat on the dam was crowding around the plaster. They were fighting each other for a bite.

The party spread a thin trail of plaster as they hurried toward Pyramid Mountain. Up the trail they went, followed by the rock rats.

"Let's move on to Pyramid Mountain!" shouted Maria-Luisa.

"On to Pyramid Mountain!" echoed everyone else.



# Chapter 8:

## Into the Light of Day

The rock rats came after the plaster "like a pack of hounds after a fox." They ate the plaster quickly, and begged for more.

As soon as everyone reached Pyramid Mountain, Maria-Luisa and Jim began pouring plaster into the cracks in the rocks. Everyone else followed their example. As the rock rats ate their way through the rocks to the plaster, Jim and Maria-Luisa poured more of the white powder into the remaining cracks. The rats ate deeper and deeper into the mountain. By early evening they had cleared a tunnel almost to where Dr. Lee and Big Al were trapped. Then, Maria-Luisa and Jim heard Dr. Lee's voice.

"Al," came the weak voice of Dr. Lee. "Do you hear that rumble? It seems to be coming from outside."

"Yes, I do," replied another weak voice. "Could it be someone trying to cut into the mountain to save us? Listen, I hear a voice."

"Dr. Lee! Big Al!" shouted Jim. "Is that you?"

"Yes, yes," answered the doctor. "Who's there?"

"My name is Jim. We're trying to save you. The rock rats are breaking through to you. They have only a few more inches to go."

Then, Jim shouted the good news to the people waiting outside the tunnel.

"We've found Dr. Lee!" he yelled. "He and Big Al are still alive."

"Hurray!" shouted all the people.

A few minutes later, Dr. Lee and Big Al crawled out of the tunnel and into the sunshine.

"Hurray!" everyone shouted again. "Hurray for Dr. Lee and Big Al!"

The two scientists sat down on a rock. They were dirty and tired. Their beards had grown a full inch while they had been trapped in the mountain, but they were unhurt. One of the Czarina's men handed them some sandwiches and water.

"Perhaps this will help you get your strength back," said the man.

"Thank you. You're very kind," said Dr. Lee. "We're unhurt, but very, very hungry."

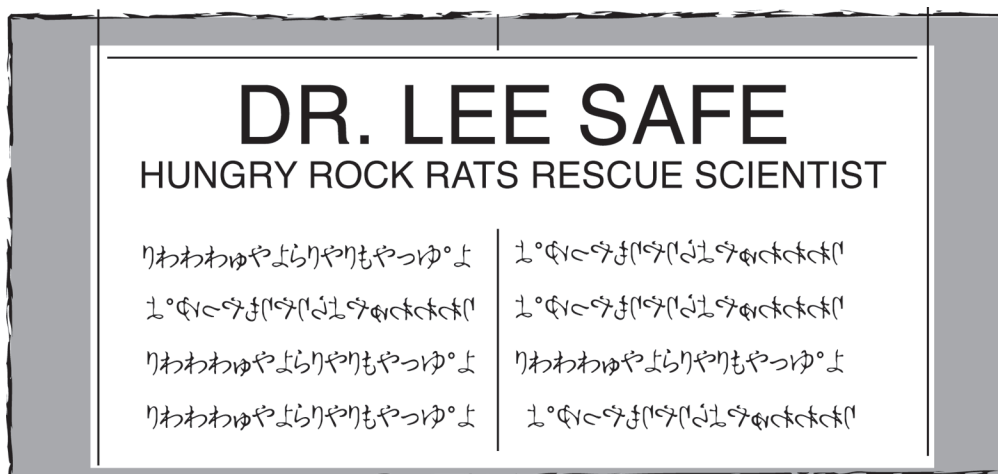
While Dr. Lee ate, he talked about their days inside the mountain.

"Al and I didn't think we'd be rescued," he said. "We thought we'd never see the sunshine again. Whoever came up with the idea of using rock rats must be very smart. I can see the headlines now."

"It was Jim and Maria-Luisa's idea," said the Czarina. She smiled. "They came from the planet Earth to help you."

"Al and I can never thank you enough," said Dr. Lee. "You're both very brave."

"Thank you," said Maria-Luisa, "but it wasn't all our doing. Without the Czarina and all these wonderful people, you'd still be in that mountain. We can't forget about the rock rats. They did their part too."



"Yes," said Czarina Happy. "Let's not forget about the rock rats. But how can we keep them from returning to the dam once they've eaten these bags of plaster?"

"Can you get more plaster?" asked Jim.

"Of course," the Czarina said. "We have large plaster factories. We can get all the top-quality plaster we need."

"Fine," said Jim. "Then, all you must do is to make certain there's always someone up here pouring plaster into the mountain. It'll take the rock rats years to eat the entire mountain. When that's gone, you can move them to another mountain. Those rats will stay wherever there is plaster. You shouldn't have to worry about them again."

"Now, why didn't I think of that?" said the Czarina. "Would you like to stay on Zoon, as my advisors?"

"We'd like to stay," said Maria-Luisa, "but we must return to our home. The *Starlight* leaves for planet Earth tomorrow, and we must be on it. Our parents are probably very worried about us."

"I'll be sorry to see you go," said the Czarina. "It seems as though you just arrived. It's difficult to believe how much you've helped us in such a short time."

“We’ll never forget how much they’ve helped us,” said Big Al. “If it hadn’t been for Jim and Maria-Luisa, Dr. Lee and I wouldn’t be alive today.”

At that moment, one of the rock rats on the side of the mountain turned around. It looked down at Jim and Maria-Luisa. With its front paw it wiped a big patch of plaster from its face. Then, it snapped its horse-like teeth together and smiled.

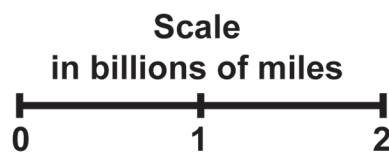
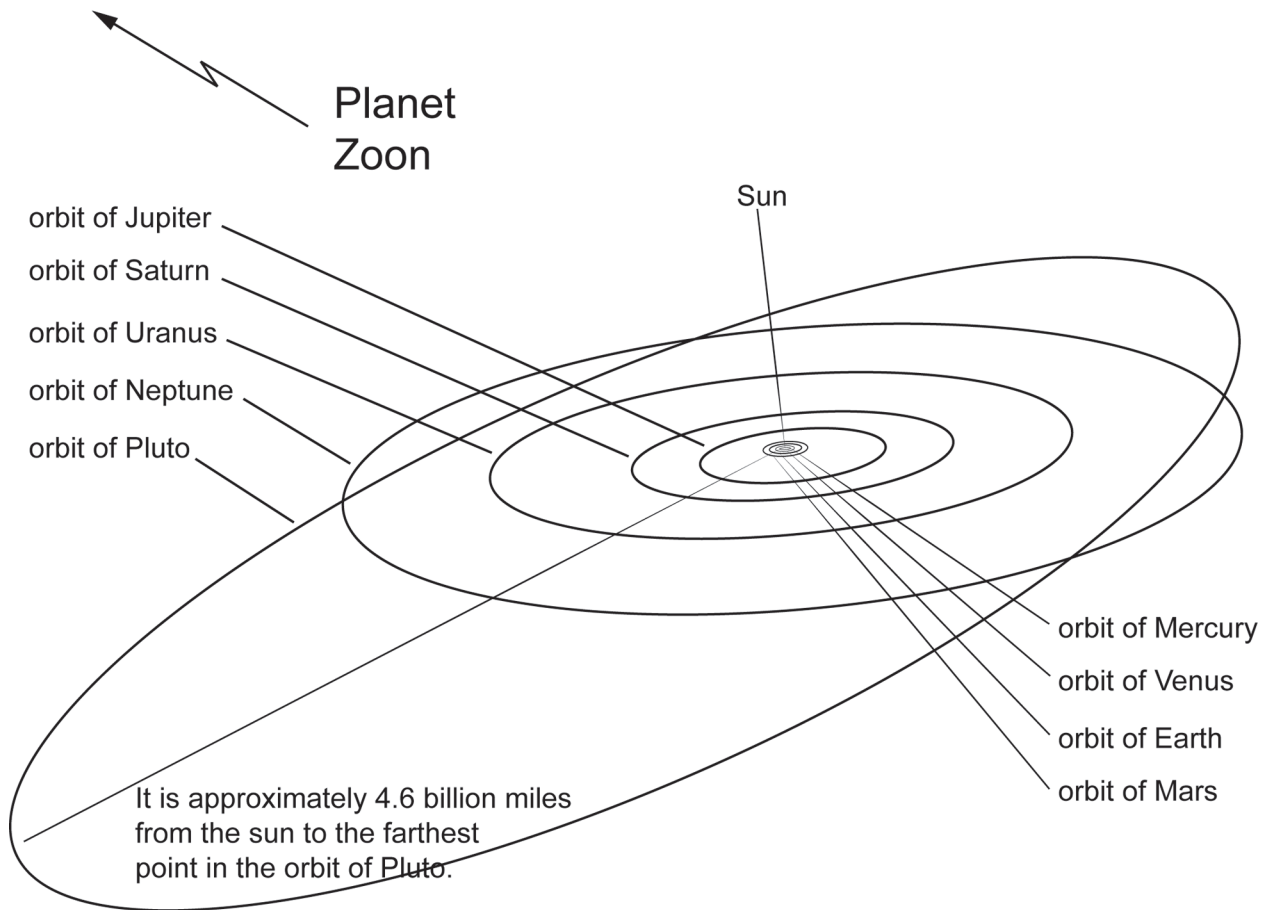
“The rock rats thank you too,” said the Czarina. “You’ve changed their diet from old, dusty rocks to tasty, dessert-quality plaster.”

Jim laughed and shouted up at the rock rat, “We’re glad to have been of help!”

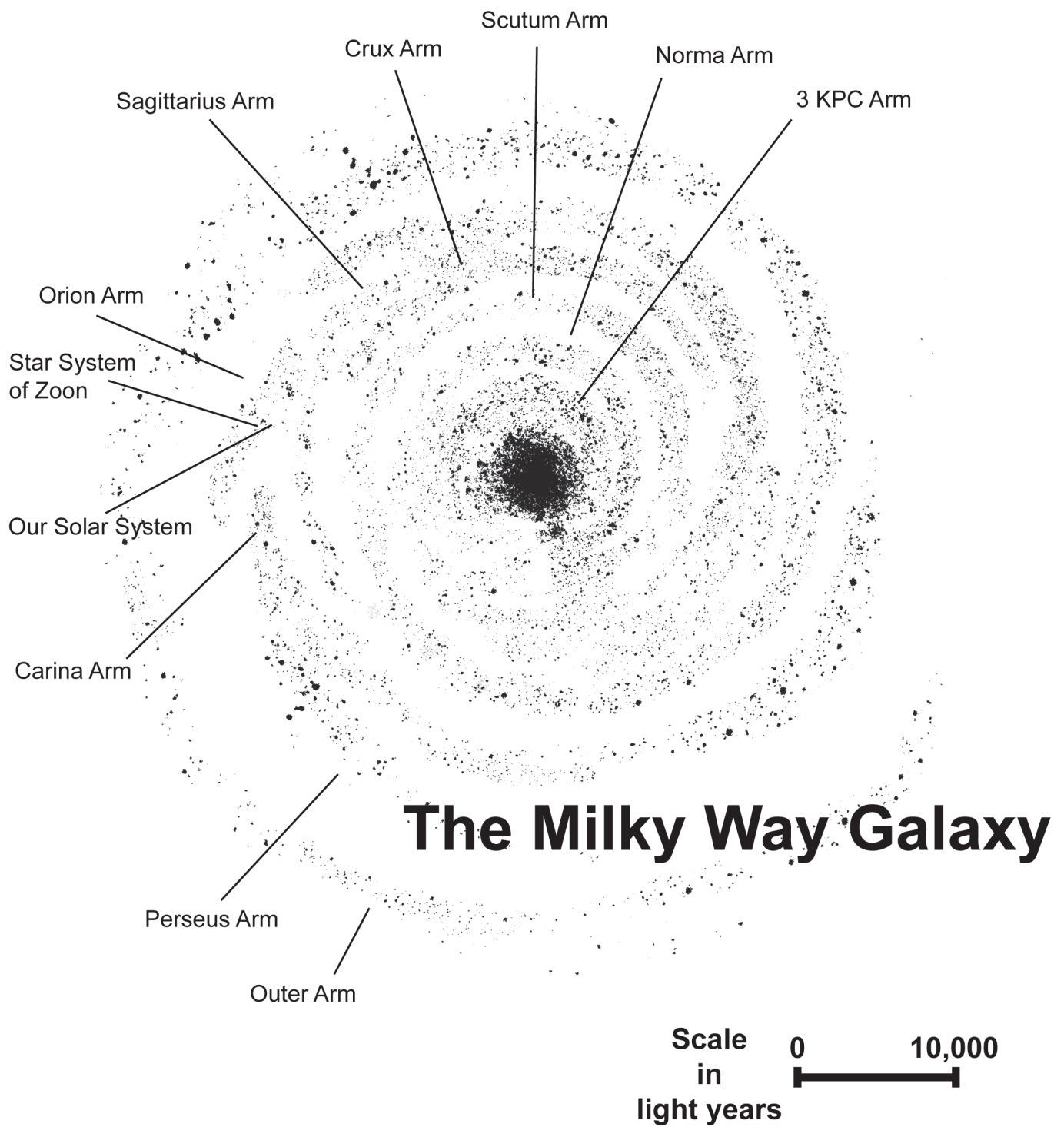
The rock rat didn’t hear Jim. It didn’t even look up, because it had already locked its teeth onto a rock. The rat was chewing its way to another tasty meal of plaster.



# Our Solar System



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## “Fluency Builders”

### *Model Lesson Plan Summary: Fluency, Vocabulary and Comprehension*

**Step 1. Review of Vocabulary from the Previous Chapter** (*approximately 2 minutes*). The instructor reviews the 10 most difficult words from the previous chapter. See Step 7 of this Lesson Plan for more information. Any very difficult words should be added to the Step 7 list for further review.

**Step 2. Overview and Vocabulary Check for the Chapter** (*approximately 5 minutes*). Students read the chapter and prepare their own written list of words they cannot pronounce, decode, or understand. The instructor discusses and explains these words. Students demonstrate their understanding of difficult words by using the word in a sentence in another context. Building on the discussion of the vocabulary, the teacher asks questions to elicit the main ideas of the chapter and generate a summary of the actions, major characters, or concepts. This discussion should serve as a brief, introductory overview of the chapter.

**Step 3. Fluency Practice in Speed and Accuracy** (*approximately 10 to 15 minutes*). The instructor should model the appropriate fluency skills by reading the first paragraph at an appropriate pace. That is, approximately 120 words per minute and with appropriate expression. The instructor should “randomly” select students to read a paragraph aloud. To ensure active participation by all students, the instructor should occasionally stop the student reading in mid-paragraph and ask another student to finish the paragraph.

**Step 4. Comprehension Instruction** (*approximately 5 minutes*). Assign each student to prepare a comprehension question for the group. Students should be assigned to prepare either a “how,” “what,” “why,” “when,” or “where” question. Each student should then pose a comprehension question to the group; the answer should be discussed by the group.

**Step 5. Oral Comprehension Check** (*approximately 5 minutes*). This is a discussion session that explicitly applies comprehension concepts to the chapter. The teacher should generate questions to elicit such issues as “What is the main idea?” “What was the motive?” “What was the sequence?” “What happened first? Last?” “Summarize the chapter.” The instructor should ensure that students have practice with literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension questions. The discussion for Step 5 should serve as a gentle, yet firm, reminder that students are accountable for reading with understanding.

**Step 6. Reading with Expression** (*approximately 5 minutes*). Students should practice reading individual paragraphs with expression. This should be a fun experience. Focus on expression, not on speed and accuracy. Students may practice using different voices for different characters, changing intonation to indicate a question, and reading with pauses to build interest and anticipation. Each student should be given an opportunity to read at least one paragraph to the group.

**Step 7. Prepare a Vocabulary Review List for the Chapter** (*approximately 3 minutes*). The teacher and group should prepare a list of the chapter’s most difficult words to decode and understand. This should be a 10-word list based on difficult words encountered in the lesson. Each student should be required to review this list of 10 words as a homework assignment and be prepared to read and use each word in a sentence to demonstrate understanding. This review will be done as Step 1 of the next lesson on the next chapter.

**Step 8. Individual Rate and Accuracy Assessment** (*approximately 5 minutes*). Using “Assessment Step Sample” for the chapter, assess students on rate and accuracy. Record data for each student for each chapter. Check to see that students continue to meet the assessment standards from chapter to chapter. Do the reteaching when needed for individuals or the group.

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