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The gargoyle (in Hipp-o-dee-doo-dah)

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The Gargoyle

"Wow!" Zizzi muttered, "even better than it looks from the computer pictures."

He had never been so impressed by any other planet he had visited. Blues, browns and green swirled around each other, tempered by white puffs of mist.

He was pleased as well with his new Ranger X57 telescope. It was so powerful, he'd been able to examine in detail this planet which had always fascinated him. And he was even more pleased with his Scout 750 Traveller which had brought him into the Earth's orbit. He would be able to take a good look now at these strange figures that adorned the grand buildings he had found out were called cathedrals. His powerful Extender computer had made a thorough analysis of the Earth language spoken in these parts and he would be able to use its translator to understand anything he read or heard. The Mentor would surely be pleased with his project. He was going to investigate why the Earthlings had representations of Zogoids - Zizzi's own race - on their churches.

The traveller was now entering the Earth's orbit. Zizzi activated the vessel's visibility shields. He stared out through the scanner screen.

.Zizzi slowed the craft right down. He would have to be careful about switching from visibility shields to the chameleon drives - even the powerful Scout could not handle both at once. In the split second that the 750 became visible, he must make sure that no-one saw him.

Zizzi smiled at the computer's choice of chameleon stance: the Scout would look like one of the strange figures he was about to investigate, and would wait on the wall of the big cathedral. He quickly flicked the visibility shield off and the chameleon mode switch on. But something was't right. He looked again at the computer screen. Oh no! Yes, the Scout looked like a gargoyle alright - the only one on the West Face!

"But perhaps no-one will see," thought Zizzi. "It is dark, after all."

Dark was something Zizzi did not know on Zogo. When that planet turned away from the sun, artificial daylight flooded the living areas. Not the soft yellow light he saw now coming from the cathedral and the street lights. Zizzi decided he liked the artificial light on earth better. It was more mysterious somehow.

He watched the people going in and out of the cathedral.

"That will do," he thought. He pointed on the screen to the little girl with black curly hair. She wore a long orange scarf-come-hat, a yellow jumper and yellow tartan trousers.

Zizzi found himself at the cathedral entrance, a yellow scarf-come-hat on his head and white tartan trousers and top. "Not bad," he thought. But then he saw the boy in the striped sweatshirt, black chinos and blue deck shoes. Ooops! Then again, he had never been known for his dress sense on Zogo either.

The boy scuffed his feet along the ground as he walked. Zizzi followed him at a distance. The boy look bored. Zizzi noticed that lots of people were avoiding walking on some of the stones on the floor that had writing on them. He caught sight of the little girl whose costume he had imitated.

"Words!" she said, pointing down at the paving-stones.

"Yes," said the tall man who was holding her hand. "Those are people's graves. You should try not to walk on them."

"Graves?" asked the little girl.

"Yes, where you put people who have died!"

"Oh!" The girl still looked puzzled.

Zizzi shuddered. How unhygienic! Fancy leaving dead bodies around to rot! On Zogo, once you'd stopped living your body was annihilated. Zapped! Broken up into particles which were recycled at once. Nobody wrote messages about you on the floor!

The boy in the black chinos had his hands in his pockets. The corners of his mouth turned down. His forehead creased in the middle and two lines came up from his nose.

"He looks cross," thought Zizzi.

"Look at this Gareth!" Gareth walked slowly over to where his mother was looking at a box on stilts which came almost up to her shoulders.

"St Swithun's monument. You know, if it rains on the 15th of July, it will rain for another forty days. They say it's because they buried him inside and he wanted to be buried outside!"

"That's rubbish, Mum."

"Funny way to forecast the weather," thought Zizzi. "I wonder how they do it for the other 325 days?" Of course, that was why they had to put all those bodies under the floor. They hadn't learnt how to control the weather on Earth yet. So they had to know what it was going to do!

Zizzi wandered what rain felt like. It hadn't rained on Zogo for centuries. He didn't even know what water felt like. Zizzi's ancestors hadn't liked the feel of water, so they had invented a way of cleaning themselves with gentle laser guns.

Zizzi followed Mum and Gareth round the cathedral. They stopped in front of a group of statues who looked as if they were in a barn. Zizzi thought they were made of wood or stone. They looked like Earthlings, but they were shorter. They were a bit ugly too. But not as ugly as gargoyle or a Zogoid. And their clothes were different from those of the people walking around the cathedral. They all wore long robes which didn't look very practical. Three of them were better dressed than the others, and they wore jewels on their head. They were kneeling down looking at a baby in a primitive crib. There were animals too, less intelligent Earthlings, also staring at the baby.

"Gosh! We wouldn't let the unthinking Zogoids near our newly hatched babies," thought Zizzi. "Not clean!" But he was impressed that they used straw for the baby's bedding, just like what they put the Zogoid eggs in.

"Two thousand years on and nothing's changed much!" said Mum. "Peace on Earth and good will to all men, indeed!"

"It's rubbish, Mum," said Gareth.

"He's not very impressed by anything," thought Zizzi. "Perhaps he'd like it better on Zogo."

Zizzi was fascinated by the cathedral. That soft yellow light was everywhere. And those enormous arrangements of bright red flowers with their pointed leaves. On Zogo, all the plants were very pale, and you always had them to match your room exactly.

Not that Zizzi was dissatisfied with Zogo. There was always plenty to see and do, especially now that he had the new telescope and the Scout. And the Extender computer always came up with good ideas.

The Gareth and the Mum made their way towards the place Zizzi read was called the "North Transept." They were soon walking over some highly patterned tiles. Zizzi saw a notice which said that the tiles were from the thirteenth century and that visitors should take care of how they walked on them.

"Better hover across," he thought. To his disgust the Gareth and the Mum just walked across normally. Zizzi hoisted himself into the air, and glided across. Something made the Gareth turn round. His mouth dropped open when he saw Zizzi suspended in the air.

"Mum!" he shouted.

"They're really beautiful, aren't they?" said Mum.

"No, but Mum..!"

It dawned on Zizzi then. Humans don't hover. He dropped to the floor at once.

"Come on," said Mum. "We'd better go and get Grandpa's present. The shop will be shut soon."

Zizzi decided to keep his distance. He looked at some of the decorations on the walls.

"I hope it's not raining. You didn't bring your coat," she continued.

Rain! He would have to see that!

Mum and Gareth were now hurrying towards the exit of the cathedral. Every now and then Gareth looked back towards Zizzi. Zizzi would not meet his eyes. He watched them from the big doorway, - the West Door, he read - as they rushed across to the Cathedral Shop opposite. There was water falling from the sky.

"Rain! Great!" thought Zizzi. "I must try this!"

He stepped out into the cold.

The rain was blowing towards the West Face of the cathedral. The droplets of water fell on Zizzi's hands and face. They stung. He had to close his eyes. The scarf was no protection. It only took seconds for his top to be wet through and Zizzi did not like that feeling. It was slimy, like when you touched a Zogosnail, and it was like having lots of pins stuck into you. Like grey dull metal. He felt cold and he shivered. No wonder his ancestors didn't like water. He'd had enough of rain. Should he return straight back to the Scout? But he hadn't found out any more about gargoyles yet. He looked up at the cathedral. Just one ugly face looked down at him and he knew what that was. A gust of wind pushed him towards the open door of the cathedral shop.

Yes. He would go to the shop! Perhaps he could make Mums and Gareth his project instead. And he would like to find more about that baby who had been born two thousand years ago.

Zizzi watched the shoppers. They seemed to go to a counter with the goods they wanted and then hand over some pieces of metal or a flat rectangle. The Mentor had told him about something like this on Zogo as part of a history lesson. Now if you wanted to buy something, you got the shop on the computer screen and paid for it by authorising credits with your voice. This shop was much more interesting, even if it did take much longer. It was great to be able to see the goods and even touch them.

He spotted the Gareth and the Mum by the counter.

"It's naff," said the Gareth. "But I suppose he'll like it." He was holding one of those stringy things that Zizzi had seen around the necks of some of the men in the cathedral. It was richly coloured and had pictures of those people in that barn again.

Zizzi carried on browsing. He was in the section with books. Zizzi's grandfather used to talk about books. Now the only ones you could get were those you downloaded from the computer. Older people liked to read them when they were in the sleeping cells. But most Zogoids preferred to read direct from the computer. He had found some more information about the baby. It was a boy called Jesus. And he had been born in a place called Bethlehem, although his parents came from another place called Nazareth. But he

couldn't find out much more from the books, because they were written for Earthlings who knew the full story.

Then he saw it. "A History of Gargoyles". The one on the cover looked just like him. And inside there were ones like the Mentor, like his mother and his father, another just like his bother Tobo and even one like his pet, Horendz, with its long double ears and scaly back. He would have to buy this.

He felt in the pocket of his trousers! Yes, there were some of the strange metal Earthling coins there. He pulled them out. There were four heavy gold-coloured ones, a strange, large seven-sided silver coloured one, two smaller seven-sided silver ones and an assortment of silver and copper coloured coins, both in two different sizes. He looked at the numbers on the book. £4.99. He supposed he had enough. He would have to watch everyone very carefully at the counter.

But then the Gareth saw him.

"Eh, Mum," he said. "It's that geek again. The one who floated"

A loud ringing noise suddenly started coming from the back of Zizzi's chameleon suit.

"Zotto!" he thought. "I forgot to charge the battery! I've got two minutes to get back to the ship!"

Zizzi was still clutching the book as he ran through the door of the cathedral shop.

"Hey, you haven't paid for that," shouted the man behind the counter. Zizzi speed hovered over the square between the shop and the cathedral. Fortunately, it was dark and the Earthlings couldn't see how he was moving so fast. The Gareth and several others were following him, though.

Only the Gareth saw him jump up. As Zizzi landed on the West Face of the cathedral, next to his Scout, the battery on the suit finally gave up altogether. He now sat there in his Zogoid form.

"Can you see him?" called the Mum. The Gareth turned to face her.

"I... er ..." he started.

Zizzi hurried into the Scout and set her off through the Earth's atmosphere. He would have to do two orbits to get her up to power. He flicked on the Ranger's screen and zoomed on to the cathedral. The Gareth and the Mum were talking to a man in a dark navy uniform.

"He just seemed to jump up," said the Gareth. "But when I looked up there was nothing but a couple of those funny statues. One was about six times as big as the other."

The man in uniform sighed and shut his note book. He looked up.

"Are you on something, Sonny?" he said. "There are no gargoyles on the West Face."

The main screen of the Scout's communication system crackled on. It was the Mentor. Zizzi had been dreading this.

"Well that didn't go too well, did it? You know you will loose your Scout licence if you reveal yourself three times without permission from Explorer Corps. You must be more careful Zizzi."

Zizzi hung his head.

"Well, anyway, cheer up. Did you find out any more about the gargoyles?"

"Well, there aren't any on the West Face of Winchester Cathedral."

"Hm. Was that worth the risk?"

"And I have got a book."

"You stole a book, you mean."

"Mmm. Yes."

"Well, we'll have to find a way to compensate."

"Actually, I was thinking."

"Yes?"

"Maybe gargoyles aren't so interesting. I'd like to find out more about the Gareth. And perhaps about that baby."

"Well, perhaps. We'll discuss it when you get back to Zogo. Peace to Zogoids."

"Peace to Zogoids."

Zizzi was now leaving the Earth's orbit. He took one last look at the planet. It looked like a giant marble, all blue and white swirls. It would be good to return to Zogo, where life was easy and pleasant and much more modern than on Earth. But he would be back! Oh yes, he would be back!