

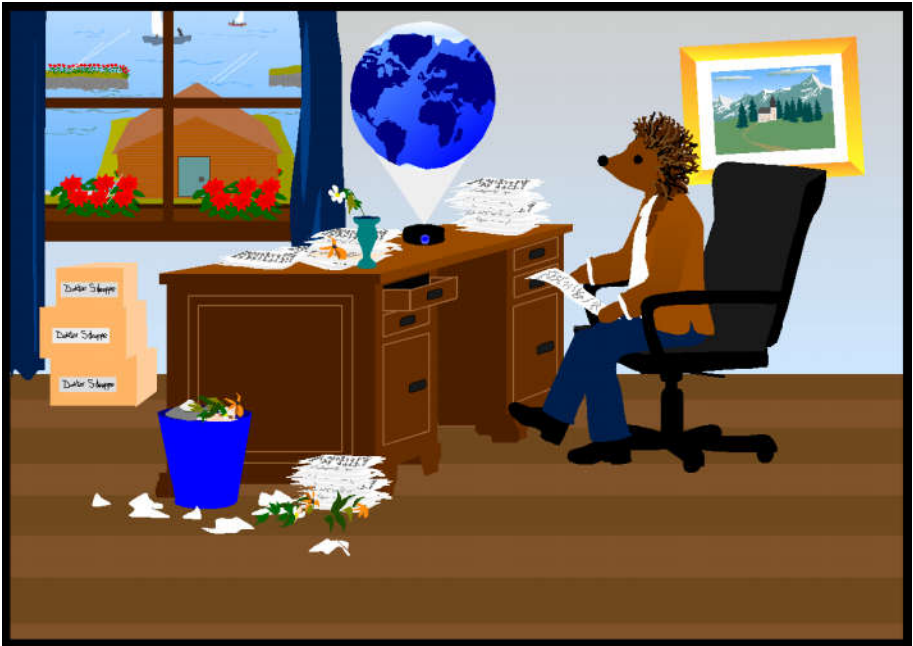
But it was the company name on the cards that made Snipper gape in astonishment. It was none other than Astellaritz, the space factory which Pawline and Schnüffel were visiting today.



Snipper felt sure the identity cards were fakes and Astellaritz was the factory they intended to burgle. He wondered whether de Poynte was interested in Pawline and Schnüffel as well as Despina, though they would be long gone before the burglary took place. And there was one other thing about the factory which stood out. Astellaritz specialized in satellites, rockets and space robotics. Snipper could hardly ignore the connection with de Poynte's claim to be from outer space. Astellaritz made just the sort of things a space traveller might want to steal. Perhaps de Poynte really did believe himself to be some sort of alien and was after spare parts for his imaginary spaceship. But there were three other hedgehogs involved in this and surely they could not all be mad... Had de Poynte actually been telling the truth?

Brushing these absurd thoughts aside, Snipper returned the identity cards to their envelope and resumed his search. As he went through the desk drawers, his eye was caught by a plain metallic cylinder with a single button on one side. He placed it on the desk and pressed the button. A holographic projection of the Earth appeared. Though he had seen holograms before, this looked so real he instinctively leant

forward to touch it with his paw. To his astonishment, it felt completely solid. He touched it again, and this time place names appeared. Now he tried brushing the hologram with his paw and found he could make the globe spin on its axis. Spinning it round to Hedgermany, he spotted three dots marking Milchnicht, Astellaritz and Igelinsel: the city where Despina had been kidnapped, the space factory which was about to be burgled and this island. A fourth unmarked dot lay on the equator - adrift in the middle of the ocean. He tapped the dot marking Astellaritz, whereupon the globe vanished; it was now replaced by another projection of a large industrial building, its grounds and immediate surroundings.



Snipper watched, fascinated, as tiny life-like trees swayed in an invisible breeze and two even tinier hedgehogs swiped their ID cards at the main gate and then made their way up to the front entrance. Just as they disappeared into the building, the sound of footsteps on the staircase made Snipper jump up. Turning off the hologram, he slipped the projector into his pocket with the ID cards and looked for a place to hide. But, before he could move, the tall hedgehog in the denim jacket had appeared in the doorway.

"Who are you? What are you doing in here?" he asked sharply. Snipper noticed he spoke Hedgerman with the same unplaceable sing-song accent as Count de Poynte.

"My name's Snipper. I'm looking for Despina."

"Snipper!" exclaimed the other. He sounded shocked. It was clear he knew the name and equally clear that Snipper's sudden appearance was most unwelcome. "You won't find your friend here."

"So where *will* I find her?"

"You've already been told - she was taken by the Verdissians."

"For pity's sake!" pleaded Snipper. "Why can't someone just tell me the truth? If it's a ransom you want, say so!"

"How did you find us?" asked the other hedgehog, ignoring Snipper's outburst.

"I tailed you, " said Snipper. He took a deep breath to recover his composure. "From your meeting with Count de Poynte. The door was unlocked."

The other hedgehog stared at Snipper for a moment, his whiskers twitching ever so slightly. Snipper thought he seemed nervous. Certainly de Poynte was unlikely to be impressed by their security arrangements.



"Look, I'm sorry," said Snipper, thinking he should get out while he still could. "I'd no right to barge in here. I'll go now." He made a move towards the door, but the other hedgehog barred his exit.

"Wait," commanded the other. He got out his phone and made a call. When it was answered, he said something - or sang something - in a language which sounded like no other on Earth. Then he offered the phone to Snipper. "It's Commander Woad – the hedgehog you know as Count de Poynte," he explained. "He wants to speak to you."

"Hello?" said Snipper, taking the phone.

"You're a very persistent hedgehog," said Woad.

"I just want to find my friend."

"Of course. But how much? How far would you really be prepared to go for her?"

"I'd go to the ends of the world for Despina," said Snipper anxiously, wondering where this was leading.

"Oh, but you'll have to go considerably further than that."

Hearing the same old story, Snipper had to resist the temptation to ring off. "You're going to burgle the Astellaritz space factory, aren't you?" he said. "Why? What's it got to do with Despina's abduction?"

"It has nothing to do with her abduction," said Woad with a sigh of impatience. "*We* have nothing to do with her abduction. But listen. We may be able to help you find her. We have someone on the inside. And, if you're willing to come with us, I'm willing to lay on a rescue mission."

"When?" asked Snipper. He did not bother to ask where. He knew he would be given the same old answer – Verdis.

"On Thursday. That's the earliest we can be ready."

"All right," agreed Snipper. "I'll come back then." Although he still did not believe the story about Verdis and hedgehogs from outer space, he felt unable to refuse the offer. In the meantime, he would have three days in which to continue his own investigation.

"Oh, I'm afraid you won't be going anywhere in the meantime," said Woad. "You know too much. I won't run the risk of you going to the police. Now pass me back to my colleague."

Though Snipper had no intention of staying put for the next three days, he made no attempt to reason with Woad. Passing the phone back in silence, he then listened in fascination while there was a brief but very tuneful conversation. Then he was taken down to the kitchen, where the tubby hedgehog and their driver were just pouring themselves a hot drink. They were naturally startled to see him. But,

after a brief explanation from their colleague, they relaxed and everyone was finally introduced. The tall and tubby hedgehogs announced themselves as Lieutenants Lappis and Lazzuli of the Cerulean Space Force. The driver gave her name as Space Cadet Cyanne.

"So you mean..." said Snipper, hesitantly. Somehow he could hardly bring himself to say it out loud – it sounded so foolish. "You're telling me you're... that you, as well as Count de Poynte – or Commander Woad or whatever he's called, are from outer space."

"We are," said Lieutenant Lappis in the most matter-of-fact way possible. "Now, enough questions - "

"If he's staying," said Lieutenant Lazzuli, "he can make himself useful. There's a pile of washing up over there which needs doing."

For a moment Snipper wondered whether he had heard right. Over the course of his career as a secret agent, he had been threatened, imprisoned and beaten up. Once he had even been dumped in a wilderness and left to die. But no one had ever told him to do their washing up before. He reckoned that, on the whole, they were letting him off rather lightly, given he had just been caught going through their things.

"All right," he said. "Just let me text my friends first or they'll worry. When shall I tell them I'll be back?"

"You can text them later," said Lappis. "After you've finished washing up."

Snipper rather doubted they intended to let him communicate with his friends at all, even after he had done their chores for them. He would have to find a moment when they were not looking. In the meantime, he rolled up his sleeves and got going on the dishes. It was hard work, as the stuff had clearly been sitting around for a while and there was an awful lot of it. Eventually, however, he finished and was rewarded with a cup of tea, which he took gratefully. They even allowed him to sit at the kitchen table with them. And for a while he just sat there, silently sipping his tea, watching this mysterious band of hedgehogs as they examined a piece of machinery. He got the impression it was faulty though he had no idea what it was. In fact, they seemed so intent on their examination and so singularly uninterested in him that it seemed like a good moment to try texting Pawline.

Snipper reached into his pocket for his phone; but, as he did so, he was suddenly conscious of a curious numbness in his paws. He found

himself fumbling so badly that he was unable to operate the thing at all. If only the phone were not so far away it might be a little easier. And if only he were not so very tired... so very, very tired... Gradually, a vague realization crept into Snipper's fuzzy head that his tea had been drugged. He prodded a claw into his leg in an effort to resist, but his leg seemed to have lost all feeling. As he sat there, unable to move, he tried hard to think. Why had they...? Who...? But the thoughts were confused, formless - random even. As he slumped forwards, he heard someone get up. His phone was taken from him and his pockets were searched. The ID cards and holographic projector were swiftly removed. Snipper wondered whether it was really so important to stay awake. If only he could sleep - even just for a few seconds, he would feel so much better...

He slept. Once or twice, he started to surface. But then there would be a sharp, pricking sensation in his arm, and he would feel himself falling into a deep and irresistible slumber. The first time it happened, he was vaguely aware of faces - an array of hedgehogs bending over him, singing tunefully to one another. The second time, he found himself being carried along a path. It seemed to be night, but he could just make out the glint of a lake ahead and the silhouette of a seaplane. Then there were more voices and that pricking sensation... Then sleep.

