

# *A Holiday on Earth*



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A HOLIDAY ON EARTH  
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*In memory of Ross Mudie.*

## Foreword

Near the end of *Plight of the Tivinel*, David invites Cam to spend their two-month break from university hanging out with him at a beach somewhere on Earth. No more is said of their time away in either that book or *Rise of the Gomerai*, so this story follows them as they part company with Joel upon their arrival in Earth orbit on board Damon's ship.



## Arrival

The count-down timer on the console had reached its final seconds when Joel sauntered into the cockpit, looking bright and relaxed. “Are we there yet?”

Damon turned as a flash of orange light enveloped them. “Yep, we’re there.”

Far below, Earth’s seas and continents spread out beneath them as the navigation screen burst into life, locking one by one onto the Milky Way’s subspace beacons.

*“Renewal, this is Orbital Control, please hold your position.”*

“Roger, Renewal standing by.”

“What’s that about?” Joel asked.

Damon shrugged. “Maybe there’s a freighter heading in or out; they always have priority over civilian traffic.”

*“Renewal, on my mark drop to orbital level twenty-three and proceed to the customs station.”*

“Wilco.”

*“Three, two, one, mark. Orbital Control out.”*

Damon engaged the retro-thrusters, dropping the nose of the ship towards the planet. “Renewal out.”

“That was very terse and formal,” David said. “Usually they’re a lot more laid back and chatty. I wonder what’s happening.”

Damon pointed to the customs station looming up ahead. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

*“Renewal, this is Customs, proceed to docking bay five.”*

“Renewal, wilco.”

Joel gulped. “Maybe we did something in the past that’s changed things here.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing but a formality.”

Two men in dark suits came forward to meet them as they stepped from the ship.

“I’m Claude le Grange from the Brigade Criminelle in France and this is Detective Inspector Kent from Australia. We’ve been investigating Joel’s kidnapping and have just a few formalities to complete, if you don’t mind.”

David shrugged while Cam and Joel looked each other.

“I understand Tristan Gosling is dead, is that correct?”

“Um, yes,” Joel said.

“Which of you killed him?”

“None, actually; it was someone from Ignus. Is he in trouble?”

“No, not at all, it’s just for the files, you understand. Speaking of Ignus, I believe you also instigated the political and financial upheaval there, is that right?”

“I guess so, but I was just trying to help the people.”

“I understand perfectly, Joel. You’re not in any trouble, this is purely for my curiosity, but now Inspector Kent has something for you.”

“Come through here,” Kent said, leading them into a side room where he pulled a backpack from a large evidence bag. “We found this while searching Gosling’s premises and believe it to be yours. It contains some board shorts and a tee shirt, which we’ve washed for you, along with your wallet, passport and Camino credential. There was also a bag of apples, bananas and oranges but I’m afraid they’d gone putrid by the time we found them.”

“Thanks so much, that’s great.”

“You’ve also helped resolve a mystery that’d plagued my grandfather right up to his death. He was the desk sergeant at Katoomba Police Station and encountered some Tivinel in the course of an investigation, but thanks to you I can finally mark that case as closed.”

Joel scratched his head, having no idea what he was talking about.

“Damon, David and Cam,” le Grange said, “you’re free to go now, but I need to take Joel back to France to tie up some loose ends of my own. It won’t take long, I promise.”

David bristled. “Now just a damn second. How do we know you’re not another kidnapper?”

Kent and le Grange both showed him their warrant cards. “Here, David, use my phone to call your parents; they’ll vouch for me, I’m sure.”

David placed the call, a grin slowly spreading across his face. “Dad said everything’s above board and you should go with him, Joel. Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Excellent, thank you, gentlemen,” le Grange said.

“What’s going on, Davo?” Cam asked.

“I’ll tell you once we’re on board.” David wrapped Joel in a hug. “It’s fine, Joel, really; just some bureaucrat in France with a form to complete. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks. See you.”

Damon and Cam each shook Joel’s hand before the three returned to their ship.

“Over this way, Joel,” le Grange said, leading him to a small shuttle in the corner of the docking bay. “Don’t forget your backpack.”

“What’s happening, Davo?” Cam asked as he followed David back onto Damon’s cruiser. “Has Joel been arrested?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. They’re taking him back to the place he was kidnapped from.”

“But why?”

“Lorraine’s waiting there to surprise him.”

“Isn’t that a bit cruel? Couldn’t she have just met him at the space port?”

“No, if she’d done that Joel would still have had lingering doubts about her. This way, when he sees the effort she’s gone to with her charade, he’ll know for sure she loves him.”

Cam shook his head. “I dunno, Davo; if it was me instead of Joel I’d be pretty peeved.”

“That’s because you don’t know Loraine very well. Trust me; it’s all for the best.”

Cam stared out the window as the ship descended through the atmosphere, but all he could see was cloud. He was beginning to wonder if Earth might be like Ignus and mostly enshrouded when the cloud abruptly ended, unveiling a sparkling blue ocean. Moments later they crossed over the ochre coast of a rugged ancient landscape.

“That’s the Kimberley,” David said. “My ancient kin still inhabit that region.”

“Uh huh. It looks pretty barren.”

“From this height, yes, but there are fertile gullies and oases if you know where to look for them.”

“There’s nothing like this on Hazler, or Cornipus for that matter. There’s something about that land, though, something steadfast and wholesome I think.”

David put his arm around Cam’s shoulder. “Yes, there is. *We acknowledge the traditional custodians of these lands and pay our respects to Elders past and present.*”

“I’d like to visit there someday. Is your part of Earth like this too?”

“No, my home’s on the east coast and the bits that aren’t built out are covered in forest.”

“Oh, okay; I see I have much to learn about this world.”

“Yes, we have a lot more diversity here than you’re used to, I’m sure.”

“There’s no diversity at all on Hazler, it’s just one big mad money-making machine.”

“You really have to put all that behind you now, Cam. Your old life has ended and your new one is just beginning.”

Below them the desert gave way to grasslands, with shallow lakes visible in the hazy distance. Cam spotted a couple of long straight roads crossing the landscape but that was the only evidence of civilisation he’d so far seen.

More roads appeared, leading into a small township of maybe a few dozen buildings, with a quilt-work pattern of farms surrounding it.

The radio burst into life, speaking in the Earth language Cam didn’t understand. Damon responded in the same tongue before making a small course correction.

“Um, Davo, do you think it might be a problem with me not speaking your language? I mean, how am I going to call for help when you fall down the stairs and break your leg?”

David grinned. “That’s what I love about you, Cam; your positive outlook and happy disposition. Don’t worry; we can fix your language problem when we land.”

“Fix it? How?”

“You’ll see.”

Cam turned back to the window. Below now were forested ridges bisected by broad gullies cleared for farming.

“That’s the Darling Downs,” David said, peering over his shoulder. “We’re nearly there.”

Passing over a higher plateau, Cam caught his first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean. “Look, there’s some water!”

“Some water indeed; that ocean covers about a third of the planet and is several kilometres deep for much of it.”

“Gosh; I never really paid much attention to the oceans on Hazler as we lived a long way from any, but I don’t think they were that big.”

David grinned. “Don’t worry; you’ll be seeing plenty of it while you’re here.”



The cruiser's nose dipped as Damon began his descent, passing out over the sea before looping back and around towards the aerospace facility northeast of a large city.

"Welcome to Brisbane," David said as they set down next to a terminal on the far side of the field.

"Is this where you live?"

"Almost; my home is about a hundred kilometres north of here."

"We've travelled so far yet there's still a long way to go."

"Don't worry; we won't have to walk it, although, um, it'd be fun, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but not today, okay?"

David ruffled Cam's hair. "Okay."

After opening the hatch, Damon led them across the tarmac and into the terminal building where a uniformed official sat waiting to inspect their passports. Cam's stomach filled with butterflies as he handed his over, now convinced there'd be some administrative problem that would prevent his entry and see him either sent back to Hazler or thrown in prison.

"Mr Dunn, I see you're originally from Hazler but have given an address on Cornipus," the official asked in the Meridian common tongue.

"Um, yes sir, I'm a student there. Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. What's the reason for your visit?"

"Davo asked me if I wanted to come and hang out with him on a beach somewhere until we return to our classes in a couple of months and I said I would, but, um..."

The official smiled. "No need for the details; just *business or pleasure* will suffice."

"Oh, right. It's definitely pleasure then; I don't do business."

"Unusual for someone from Hazler, from what I understand, but no, that's fine." He stamped Cam's passport. "Welcome to Earth, Mr Dunn, and enjoy your time hanging out with Davo on that beach somewhere."

"Yes I will, I'm sure; thank you."

Cam followed David through the sliding door into the arrivals lounge, where a blonde-headed woman and a man with long black hair stood waiting. After a moment of puzzlement he recognised them as David's parents, the Delphinidae High Priestess Lorina and the former Supreme Councillor Mark the Bewildered, the latter, as always, wearing just a pair of yellow board shorts.

"You must be Cam," Lorina said, wrapping her arms around him and kissing him on the nose. "David's told me all about you."

Cam gulped. "I'm sure it's not all true; I'm not your typical Hazzle, really."

"Of course you're not," Mark said, shaking his hand and grinning broadly. "You'd hardly be studying astrophysics if you were."

Cam blushed. "That's true."

Lorina turned to Damon. "Are you heading straight back or staying around?"

"I thought I'd go visit the college while I'm here, if that's okay."

"Yes, of course; you're welcome anytime, you know that."

"Thanks."

"My car's just out here," Mark said, turning towards the exit. "Have you got everything?"

"Yes Dad," David said, picking up his small backpack. "We travel light."

"There's no need for a change of clothes when he doesn't wear any," Cam said.

Lorina turned to Cam. "What about you?"

He picked up his backpack. "I'm much the same; just a toothbrush and a few books."

Mark grinned. "Let's go then."

Cam followed everyone out to the car park behind the terminal building, where Mark opened a small five-seater hatchback.

"You don't mind riding in the back with David, do you Cam?" Lorina asked as she opened the front passenger door.

"No, not at all. Anywhere will be fine."

“I’ll put him in the boot,” David said.

“The what? I didn’t think any of you wore shoes.”

“Don’t listen to him, Cam,” Mark said as he climbed into the driver’s seat. “You should know what he’s like by now.”

“He’s a slow learner,” David said, “but I’m sure this holiday will bring him up to speed.”

Cam poked him in the ribs.

“Ouch!”

“No fighting back there or you can both walk home,” Lorina said.

David ruffled Cam’s hair. “Truce?”

“Huh?”

“Are you sure you can put up with him for two months?” Mark asked.

Cam stared at David for several seconds before answering. “No, but I’ll manage somehow I guess. Anything would be better than going back to Hazler, which reminds me, Davo; where is it we’re going?”

“Lord Howe Island.”

“Oh, right. Does Lord Howe know we’re coming?”

“No, but don’t worry, he’s been dead for nearly three hundred years.”

“But, um, how...”

“You’re going to love it, Cam,” Mark said. “Lorina and I spent a week there a couple of years ago and it’s just magical.”

“Will you be doing the Mount Gower climb?” Lorina asked.

David grinned. “Of course.”

“I hope you’re good with heights, Cam.”

Cam gulped. “I hope I am too.”

“You’ll be fine, Cam,” Mark said. “Just don’t look down.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Don’t go coaxing him into doing things he’s not comfortable with,” Lorina said. “He’s not as rough-and-tumble as you, David.”

“Rough-and-tumble? Me?”

Lorina shook her head.

“I’ll be fine, really,” Cam said.

Mark turned off the motorway at the Coolum Beach exit. Cam stared in wonder as they crested the hill and descended towards the sparkling waters just beyond the town centre.



“Nice, don’t you think?” David said, grinning at him.

“Is, is this where you live, Davo?”

“Yep.”

After negotiating a couple of backstreets, Mark pulled into the driveway of a modest brick and tile house. “Welcome to our nest.”

Cam followed David into the house. “Wow, this is great!”

“Wait till you see the view from the back deck,” David said, leading him out through the kitchen.

Looking south-east across the neighbours’ roofs on the lower terrace, Cam soaked up the vista of ocean, sand and the rocky headland of Point Arkwright where the breaking waves sent up a golden mist in the late afternoon sun.

Lorina stepped out to join them. “David, why don’t you take Cam down to the beach for a swim while I prepare dinner?”

“Yeah, sure Mum.”

“Cam, do you have anything you particularly like or dislike?”

“Nah, I’ll eat just about anything.”

David grinned. “Good, you can have the vegetable peelings, empty packaging and cans.”

Lorina sighed as she returned to the kitchen. “It’s a wonder you have any friends at all, David.”

“I often wonder the same thing myself.”

David was about to lead Cam down the steps off the deck when he turned back. “Mum, I almost forgot. Cam needs to be able to speak English so he can call for help when I fall down the steps and break my leg.”

Cam gave him a dirty look. “No, but, um...”

“Of course, Cam,” Lorina said. “I should have thought of that myself. Come into the kitchen; it’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Huh?”

“The Delphinidae’s telepathic gift works both ways; not only can we understand and speak in any language we hear, we can pass on that understanding to others. Just close your eyes and let me touch your forehead.”

“Oh, okay.”

Words and images flashed through Cam’s mind, starting with simple objects and actions, like cats sitting on mats and dogs chasing balls, before moving onto more complex expressions. Letters and numerals appeared too, linking themselves to those words and expressions.

“Now open your eyes. How does that feel?”

“It’s like my head’s still spinning, but – hey I’m speaking your language and even thinking in it!”

Lorina handed him a pen and notepad before placing her hand back on his forehead. Cam found himself writing on the page, awkwardly at first but soon producing a fluid script. With a flourish, he signed his name at the bottom.

“That’s amazing! How long will it last?”

“It should be permanent as long as you practice occasionally. I’d recommend coming to Earth for an occasional holiday just to refresh those synapses I’ve created in your brain’s language centre.”

“Gosh, thank you so much.”

“It’s my pleasure, Cam. Now off you go to the beach.”

David led Cam down from the deck and through the back yard to a gate in the corner. On the other side, a stepped footpath led down between the houses to the main road along the beachfront.

“Come on up to where the flags are,” David said as they descended onto the sand. “There can be gnarly rips along this beach so it’s best to swim where the lifeguards can see you.”

“Lifeguards?”

“Yes, they’ll come out and rescue anyone who gets into difficulties. Just stick your hand up if you need help.”

“Oh, right. They don’t have lifeguards on Hazler beaches.”

“Why not?”

“The whole planet works on survival of the fittest; if you drown yourself in the surf, you weren’t worthy of contributing to the gene pool.”

“Gosh. Do many people drown?”

“It depends on the beach, but yes; a couple of my school friends drowned on an excursion once. A few of us tried to save them but the teacher wouldn’t let us. She said it opened the door for more capable students to join the class and used it as an example of natural selection at work.”

“That’s horrible; I’m surprised my dad allowed it while he was Supreme Councillor.”

“Deaths from misadventure are never reported or investigated so I doubt he even knew. To anyone off-world, Hazler is portrayed as a glowing example of capitalism at its best.”

“Ignorance is bliss, I guess, just like with the slave traders on Ignus, the honey-smugglers on Frizian and the bunyip-baiters on Cornipus.”

“To his credit, your dad did a lot of good work for the peasants on Amber and Sontar; no-one can ever do everything.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“And we freed the slaves and settlers on Ignus, just like you said we would.”

“We? I thought Joel and Willy did all that.”

“I meant *we* as a team: Joel, Willy, Pip, Damon, Pedro and those military guys. We were part of it too, Davo, even if we only played a small part.”

“Yeah, I guess.” David grinned while ruffling Cam’s hair. “Come on, let’s hit the water before the tide goes out.”

Cam followed David out into the deeper water just beyond where the last wave had broken, diving under to cool his head as well as the rest of him.

“This water’s so clear; it’s amazing!”

“Yeah, there are no rivers or anything nearby to cloud it with runoff. It can get a bit murkier up at Noosa after heavy rain.”

“Oh, right, it’s just that I never saw seawater this clear anywhere on Hazler.”

David turned as another wave approached. “Do you know how to catch a wave? Swim as hard —”

Before he could finish, Cam disappeared in a frenzy of whirling arms and thrashing feet as he caught the wave, riding it all the way into the beach. Catching the next one, David reached him just as he was making his way back out.

“As always you amaze me, Cam!”

“What, did you think I couldn’t swim or catch a wave? I’m not hopeless at everything, Davo, so stop patronising me.”

“Cam,” David said, grabbing his arm as he tried to storm past, “I meant it as a compliment, really. Anyway, when have I ever said you were hopeless at anything?”

“Well, um, maybe not but I’m sure you’ve thought it.”

“No way! You’re always amazing me, Cam, that’s the truth. You’re heaps better at most things than I am, including bodysurfing too, I see; it’s what I love about you.”

“Really?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well I haven’t; I’m just a nerdy scientist and lying isn’t part of my nature.”

“Sorry, I guess living on Hazler has made me suspicious of everyone’s motives.”

David grinned. “Apology accepted. Come on, let’s grab this next wave!”

After catching a dozen or so waves, David turned to Cam. “You know there’s something I’ve always wanted to try but Joel’s bodysurfing was never good enough and none of my other friends would trust me enough to try it.”

“I’m not liking the sound of this, Davo.”

“Don’t worry, nothing can go wrong; well, probably.”

Cam sighed. “What is it you want to do?”

“Tandem bodysurfing; I saw it done in a movie once and always wanted to try it.”

“How does it work?”

“I grab hold of your shoulders and ride on your back while you catch the wave.”

Cam sighed again. “Just don’t drown me, okay?”

“Don’t worry; nothing can go wrong, probably.”

They both waited, standing chest-deep, as another wave began to build on the outer sand bank.

“Now!” David shouted while grabbing hold of Cam’s shoulders.

Cam began swimming, catching the wave and starting to think it might work, until the breaking water pushed David forward, his shifting weight causing Cam to topple head-first into the sand with David now underneath him.

The wave broke over them, pushing them down harder still, until it finally subsided and ebbed, its energy spent. Cam tried to stand but David still had hold of his shoulders. Knowing he only had a few more seconds before the next wave would break on top of them, he kicked down as hard as he could into David’s belly, hoping the shock would make him let go. *Maybe he’s unconscious*



*or paralysed*, he thought, having heard stories on the news of people breaking their necks in surfing accidents. *All the more reason to get them both up to the surface.*

Bending his legs to gain some leverage against the sand, he twisted himself over onto his side while pushing up with his arms, just managing to get his head above water and take a big breath before the next wave hit. Down he went again, head-first into the sand. A moment later, something heavy struck his back, forcing the air he'd just inhaled out of his lungs.

He tried to stand but again another wave struck, tumbling him along the bottom, arms and legs flailing as he struggled to push his head above water. For just a moment he succeeded, gasping in as much as he could before his mouth filled with brine and forced him to cough all that air back out again.

Hands gripped his biceps, pulling him up. Knees shaking, he stood, heaving in more air as his vision sparkled.

"Are you okay, mate?" the teenaged boy holding him asked.

Cam coughed a couple more times. "Yeah, but, but Davo, I think he might –"

"Oh Cam," David said from behind him. "I thought for a moment you were going to be the first one ever to drown here in waist-deep water."

Cam looked down to see the water lapping just above his knees. "Davo? But, but, never mind. I thought you'd broken your neck or been knocked unconscious or something."

"Me? No, though you just about winded me when you kicked me in the stomach."

"You wouldn't let go of my shoulders."

"Oh, yeah, sorry, I forgot. Hey, do you want to try it again?"

"No I don't; not now, not ever."

"Oh, okay." David grinned. "We should head back anyway as Mum will have dinner ready by now."

David ran up towards the showers next to the surf club, leaving Cam trudging along and fuming in his wake.

“Do you want towels?” Lorina asked as they returned home, still dripping water from the beachside showers.

Cam looked at David, who shrugged. “Nah, it feels nice to let the wind dry me.”

“You’d better both stay out on the deck then; I don’t want to have to mop the floors.”

“Is dinner ready yet?” David asked.

“Almost; I was waiting for you to get back before serving it up.”

“If I’d known that we’d have come home sooner. You should’ve sent Dad down to get us.”

“Next time I will. Come and help – no, on second thought, stay where you are if you’re going to be dripping water everywhere.”

David grinned as she went back into the kitchen. “Look, Cam, I’m sorry about what happened in the surf. It was a stupid thing to try, I know that now. Please, don’t let it spoil our holiday, okay?”

“All right, I suppose, but honestly, Davo, what were you thinking?”

“The trouble is I wasn’t thinking at all; it happens to me a lot I guess.”

“From now on, just remember I’m not as rough-and-tumble as you.”

Mark followed as Lorina stepped from the kitchen, each holding a bowl. “Here you go, boys.”

“I hope you like it, Cam,” Lorina said. “It’s chicken and pasta in a creamy tomato sauce with garlic, avocado and cashews.”

Cam grinned. “It sounds scrumptious.”

“He’s not a fussy eater, Mum,” David said. “He said he’ll eat anything, didn’t you, Cam?”

“On Hazler, fussy eaters soon starve to death. We learn from an early age to eat whatever we’re given otherwise we’d get nothing.” Cam took a mouthful. “No chance of me starving with this in front of me, though; it’s delightful!”

Lorina smiled. “Thanks Cam. There’s enough left over for seconds if you want more.”

Cam nodded as he took another mouthful. "I'm sure I will."

David scooped some up. "This sure beats the college fare, Mum."

"And so it should," Mark said as he followed Lorina back into the kitchen to get their own portions. "I didn't marry your mother just for her good looks and charm."

"My father married my mother for her money and she married him for his social standing," Cam said. "It was a business deal, nothing more, nothing less, and my conception was supposed to future-proof it. I don't want to ever marry anyone or father any children."

"The rest of the universe isn't like Hazler, Cam," Lorina said as she came back out. "You're still young with lots of time to find someone you love with all your heart."

Cam smiled. "I already have, but it's complicated."

"Complications have a way of sorting themselves out if you give them time," Mark said, joining them. "Who is she?"

"That's the complication; it isn't a *she*."

"I think he means me," David said.

Mark almost choked on a mouthful of chicken. "You? But –"

"That's right, Dad. He's a boy and I'm a boy, well as much of a boy as I can be, given my heritage from Drago, so yeah, you told me I might meet someone nice at the university and I guess I did."

"Well doesn't that beat all!"

"I guess. Are you mad at me?"

"Don't be silly, David. Stunned, maybe, but I'd have probably been more stunned had you suddenly produced a girlfriend."

Lorina sighed. "I think what your father's trying to say is that we're happy you've found someone special, regardless of who it is."

David grinned. "Thanks Mum; I was going to tell you after we got back from Lord Howe Island, just in case he had second thoughts, but now the cat's out of the bag –"

Cam looked around. "What cat?"

“It’s just a saying, Cam; it means we’ve come out of the closet.”

“But we weren’t in a closet.”

David sighed. “You might be able to speak our language now but you still have a lot to learn.”

Mark turned to Cam. “I hope you know that David can’t, well, do anything physical.”

“Yes, I know and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I can’t either; that part of me just doesn’t work.”

“Oh, right, that’s good then, I think, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” David said. “Anything physical would just be a distraction; we’re purely soul-mates now and forever.”

Lorina placed one hand on Cam’s and the other on David’s. “It’s a wonderful thing to find the person you love and have that love reciprocated. How do you feel now that you’ve told us?”

“Scared,” Cam said. “All my life I’ve been running away, fighting against the destiny everyone had plotted for me, but now there’s a ray of light in the darkness I don’t want to lose it even though I don’t know where that light is taking me.”

“Embrace the unknown, Cam, embrace the light *and* the dark because a fulfilling life needs both. This goes for you too, David; you’ll face obstacles you can’t just dismiss with a joke and a side-step. It’s one thing to profess your love when you’re young and everything’s bright and rosy, but it requires a lifetime of commitment and devotion to sustain it. You’ll be sure to face dark times in the years ahead when all hope seems lost.”

“I already have, Mum; back on Huntress, I thought Tristan had killed Cam with Drago’s dart and in that moment I realised my life is totally woven around his. I messed things up big time back then and I’ve learnt my lesson, I swear.”

“For both your sakes I hope you have. Now who wants dessert?”

“That’s a rhetorical question,” Mark said before anyone could answer. “I’ll go get the pav your mother’s spent half the day preparing.”

## Island Paradise

Emerging from the bathroom with a towel around his waist, Cam sauntered out through the kitchen to the deck where the Collins family were starting breakfast.

“Good morning Cam,” Lorina said. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes thanks, like a log I guess; is that the right saying? Loraine’s bed was so comfortable I didn’t want to get up.”

“She was always fussy about having a mattress that wasn’t too hard or too soft.” She lifted the cover on a plate. “I’ve made you some scrambled eggs and toast; help yourself to the cereal and milk.”

“Um, thanks.” Cam gave David a troubled look.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that I remember Joel being freaked out by something like this.”

“Yeah, he was in a pretty bad state then.” He turned to Lorina. “Have you heard anything from Loraine? Are they talking to each other?”

“Yes, she called about an hour ago and said Joel took her little charade in good humour. They’ve left Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert and are back on their pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.”

“That’s great, I hope they take it nice and easy and let the walking work all the demons out of them.”

“I’m sure they will. At any rate she said the weather’s beautiful for walking so they’re off to a good start.”

The gate at the bottom of the yard swung open as a dark-skinned man with shoulder-length grey hair entered.

“Dad, come on up!” Mark yelled.

“This is my granddad Jason,” David said, introducing him to Cam.

Cam shook his offered hand. “I’m pleased to meet you in person, having heard all about you of course.”

Jason grimaced.

“Sorry, did I say the wrong thing?”

Mark laughed. “Dad craves anonymity and hates it whenever anyone alludes to how famous he is.”

“He’s more notorious than famous, I think,” David said, earning himself a stern look from his mother.

Jason smiled. “That’s quite all right, Cam, you weren’t to know. I’ve heard a lot about you too; it was you who released Joel’s message about the slavery on Ignus that went viral on the ultranet, wasn’t it?”

Now Cam grimaced. “I didn’t mean to, I just showed it to some other students who spread it around.”

“Not to worry, it all worked out for the best. From what I’ve heard, there’s a bunch of very bad people now behind bars thanks to you.”

David ruffled Cam’s hair. “See, I’m not the only one who thinks you’re awesome.”

Cam blushed, unsure whether to scowl at David or hug him.

Jason raised his eyebrows. “Am I missing something?”

“Later,” Lorina said. “Thanks so much for offering to fly the boys to Lord Howe, Jase.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

“So what made you decide to buy a shuttle, Granddad?” David asked.

“When Joel was kidnapped, we had to rely on the Eridanians to fly us to France and I thought that was silly when we could easily afford a shuttle of our own.”

“He and Mum have been putting it to good use,” Mark said. “They’re hardly ever home now.”

“Yes, Jenny loves it. There are places she’s always wanted to visit and now she can just go whenever she likes.”

“Where do you keep it?” David asked. “I wouldn’t have thought your garage would be big enough.”

“It isn’t, and in any case the authorities take a dim view of spacecraft coming and going from suburban back yards, so it lives in one of the general aviation hangars at the Brisbane aerospace port.”

“The bureaucrats just want to spoil everyone’s fun.”

Jason nodded. “That’s what they’re there for. As soon as you’ve finished breakfast we can be on our way and have you on Lord Howe by lunch time.”

Cam grinned. “After everything I’ve been reading about it on the ultranet, I can hardly wait.”

“It looks like you’ll have nice weather for at least your first week there. I’m sure you’ll love it, Cam.”

“I’ll make sure he does,” David said, grabbing another slice of toast and stuffing it into his mouth.

Cam stood, deciding he’d eaten enough. “I’ll go grab my stuff.”

“Duh fuh-guh yuh tuh-bruh.”

“Huh?”

“I think he said *don’t forget your toothbrush*,” Mark said.

“David, don’t –” Lorina started to say.

David swallowed. “Yes Mum, I know, *don’t talk with your mouth full*.”

Lorina sighed. “Why did I ever want to become a mother?”

\* \* \*

Jason turned onto the Sunshine Motorway with David and Cam in the back. “Cam, I hear you’re something of a whiz with fractal crystal theory.”

“Um.”

“He’s the best in the galaxy,” David said, earning himself a poke in the ribs from Cam.

“That’s what I’ve been hearing too and it’s not just from David. When you get back from Lord Howe Island, I was wondering if I might be able to pick your brains on a problem we’re having with our intergalactic subspace drives.”

“Yeah, sure, but I can’t promise I’ll be able to solve anything.”

“Of course not, but you might be able to spot something we’re overlooking.”

“Did you ask Peter about it?” David asked.

“Of course, but he’s stumped too.”

“That must be a first.”

“That’s what I said.”

“If Doctor Thorpe can’t figure it out then I don’t think I’d have much chance,” Cam said.

Jason grinned. “Maybe all it needs is fresh eyes looking at it. Anyway there’s no rush as it’s not holding up production, it’s just something Jenny and I would like to resolve for our own peace of mind.”

“Send me the details and we’ll take a look if we get a rainy day and are stuck indoors,” David said.

“I don’t want to spoil your holiday.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t. If Cam gets too absorbed in it I’ll take away his ultranet.”

“I’m starting to wish now I hadn’t mentioned it.”

They turned onto the Bruce Highway, joining the bustle of traffic heading towards Brisbane. Cam looked out the window to the right. “Hey Davo, look at those amazing mountains!”

“They’re the Glasshouse Mountains, remnants of some ancient volcanos.”

“Are they made of glass?”

“No, the shape of them reminded one of the early explorers of glass furnaces in his home town in England. There are some nice hiking tracks up there; I’ll take you on some of them when we get back if you like.”



“Yes, that’d be nice.”

“Take plenty of water with you when you do,” Jason said. “They’re pretty steep in places and you’ll feel like you’ve been cooked in a glasshouse by the time you get to the top.”

“Yes, granddad.”

The attendant stepped out to meet them as they pulled into Brisbane spaceport’s general aviation car park. “Good morning, Jase. Your shuttle’s all ready to go and I’ve lodged your flight plan to Lord Howe.”

“Thanks Tim. This is my grandson David and his friend Cam.”

“I’m pleased to meet you both. I’m sure you’ll have a wonderful time on the island, but don’t expect to be doing much partying. It’s not that sort of place.”

David grinned again. “We’re not that sort of people, are we Cam?”

Cam shook his head. “All I want is a quiet beach and some forest trails.”

Tim smiled. “You’ll love it then.”

After keying in his security code to open the gate, he led them around to the hangar where Jason’s shuttle awaited them.

“This is so cool,” David said, walking back and forth examining the fuselage. “Cam, we’ll have to buy one of these once we graduate and start earning the big bucks.”

Cam looked at Jason, who shrugged before ushering him on board. David followed after giving the real-space turbines a quick check.

“All set?” Jason asked as he closed the hatch and strapped himself in. Without waiting for an answer, he started the turbines and began their ascent.

“Will you be doing a subspace micro-jump?” David asked as they headed out to sea.

“No, the authorities frown on doing that anywhere below the transfer orbit. It’ll only take us half an hour to get there through real space anyway.”

“Okay then.”

“Look, Cam!” David said, pointing out the window as Jason levelled out after gently banking to the left. Far below, poking out of the deep blue ocean like something from a fairy tale, was a crescent of mountains and green slopes cradling the paler waters of a sandy bay. Waves broke on a reef stretching between the mountains at either end, while on the northern face were sheer cliffs plunging directly into deep water.

“That’s so beautiful, Davo, I can hardly believe it’s real.”

“It’s the remains of an ancient volcano crater,” Jason said. “The other half was eroded away by the sea.”

“What’s that sticking up away in the distance?”

“It’s Balls Pyramid, another piece of left-over volcano.”

“Oh wow, just wow!”

“I think he likes it,” David said.



Jason looped the shuttle around to the east while descending towards the landing strip set diagonally across the narrow isthmus in the middle of the island. With little wind to buffet them, he set it down gently in front of the terminal building.

A smiling young man wearing just board shorts opened the gate for them as they approached. "You must be David and Cam. I'm Nate from the *Barefoot Bliss* resort."

"Hi," David said, shaking his hand. "I was expecting Matt."

"He's my dad but he's busy this morning so he sent me."

"Oh, right."

Nate looked back towards the shuttle. "Do you have any other luggage?"

"No, we travel light."

Jason walked over to join them. "Hi Nate."

"Hi Jase, it's good to see you again! How's Jenny?"

"She's fine and sends her love to you and your parents."

"Thanks. Are you hanging around or heading straight back?"

"I have to get back to work unfortunately; things are pretty hectic with the intergalactic freighters placing big orders for subspace drives now that the price of crystals has fallen."

"It's always the way; it never rains but it pours, much like the weather here at times. Take care, mate, and I hope you and Jenny can find the time to come visit again."

"We will, yes, as soon as the rush is over. I'm sure we'll both need a holiday by then."

David and Cam waved as Jason boarded the shuttle, then followed Nate through the terminal to the car park where he ushered them on board a minibus.

"Is this your first time on the island?" he asked as he drove out onto Lagoon Road.

"Yes, although my parents came here a couple of years back," David said.

"It's my first time on Earth," Cam said.

"Well you've certainly come to the right bit of the planet."

"I know."

"I expect two fit young guys like you will be grabbing bikes, but just in case you decide to hire a car, the speed limit on the island is twenty-five kilometres per hour."

“Yes, I know,” David said, “but you’re right, we’ll be riding bikes the whole time we’re here.”

“Some of our older guests struggle a bit on the hills but you two should be fine. The kids love it.”

As if to prove his point, half a dozen kids cycled past in the other direction. Cam turned to watch them, scratching his head.

Past the end of the airport runway, the road swung around along the water’s edge, with a few houses and a sports field on the right.

“The museum, hospital and police station are over there,” Nate said, “although I hope you won’t need the last two. The museum’s worth a visit, though, particularly if you get a rainy day.”

“I doubt a bit of rain will keep us indoors,” David said, “but we’ll check out the museum anyway. It sounds interesting.”

Nate smiled. “I’m starting to really like you guys. The bike hire shop is just on the right there and this, my friends, is the island’s central business district.”

Cam scratched his head again. “Where are the office towers?”

“There’s nothing like that here, just the Anchorage restaurant, which I highly recommend, the general store, the post office and the town hall. What more does an island need?”

“Not much I guess. This is great!”

“This is one of the hills I mentioned earlier,” Nate said as the road started climbing. “You’ll get a good workout cycling up here but going back down is fun.”

Just past the top of the rise, they came to a triangular road junction.

“Ned’s Beach is down there on the left. There’s some nice snorkelling in the shallows, and if you get a clear moonless night, I recommend going down there and stretching out on the sand to look at the stars. With no street lights here to speak of, it’s a pretty amazing sight.”

“Cam and I are astrophysics students so we’ll do that, for sure.”

Nate turned into a driveway on the left. “Welcome to the *Barefoot Bliss*. There’s bike storage here and a communal barbecue up ahead.” After parking the bus he pulled a clipboard from the glovebox. “It looks like Dad’s put you in room 8 which is just over there.”

He led them across onto the decking in front of the unit, glancing down at their bare feet before handing David the key. “I was about to say that we ask guests to leave their shoes outside the rooms but I see in your case that won’t be necessary.”

“Nup, we don’t wear shoes.”

Nate grinned. “You’ll fit in perfectly on the island then. Enjoy your stay and if there’s anything you need just give me a yell.”

“Thanks, Nate.”

Cam followed David into the unit. “This is nice, better than what we have in the college on Cornipus.”

“Yes, it is.” He started the ultranet terminal in the corner and logged on. “I’ll just let my parents know that we arrived safely, then we can wander down to the lagoon and hire us some bikes.”

“Okay.”

\* \* \*

The attendant looked Cam up and down before making a slight adjustment to the seat height. “There, that should be perfect for a tall strapping lad like you.”

“Uh huh; thanks.”

After making a similar adjustment to David’s bike, he returned inside to complete the paperwork and extract his payment from David’s credit card. “Just drop them back here when you leave the island.”

Cam cautiously mounted his bike, steadying himself before lifting both feet off the ground and placing them on the pedals. David watched, his jaw dropping in disbelief, as the bike slowly toppled over.

Cam brushed himself down as he got back on his feet. "What do you do to make it stay upright? Is there a switch somewhere I have to turn on?"

David covered his mouth, trying not to laugh out loud. "Cam, have you, have you ever ridden a bike before?"

"No, I've never even seen one before, well apart from those kids we passed on the road earlier. How do you make it stay upright on just two wheels?"

"It does that when it's moving."

"But how?"

"It's the conservation of angular momentum." He picked up a stick and began drawing vector diagrams in the dust.

"Okay, but, um, how do you get on while it's moving?"

"You just push forward as you lift your foot onto the pedal and that's enough to get you going."

Cam remounted, this time pushing forward as he did. The bike rolled a couple of metres before stopping on the slight incline, whereupon Cam toppled over onto his side again. "What happened? Why'd it stop?"

"Oh Cam," David said, now unable to stop laughing. "You have to pedal to make it go."

"Pedal?"

"Come and walk it down to that playing field we passed so you can practise on the grass."

"I have training wheels if you want them," the attendant called out from behind them.

"Thanks but nah, he'll manage, I'm sure."

Standing and brushing the dust off his leg and elbow again, Cam followed David out onto the road. From behind them came the attendant's bellowing laughter.

"Okay," David said, standing with his bike at the edge of the playing field. "This is how you mount and start pedalling." He rode around in a loop before pulling up back alongside Cam. "Now you give it a go."

After a somewhat wobbly start, Cam got his bike moving without stalling or falling off. David set off after him and drew level.

“Now try stopping.”

Cam pulled on the brakes, causing the back wheel to lift off the ground. In trying to compensate, he spun around and sprawled himself across the grass with the bike on top of him.

“Maybe, um, a little less pressure on the brakes and try to apply the same amount to both wheels so you don’t tip forward.”

Cam pulled himself up while shaking his head. “Learning to drive was easier than this, I’m sure.”

“Don’t worry; you’ll soon get the hang of it.”

His second attempt proved more successful, with him coming smoothly to a stop and dismounting without falling over.

“Excellent, well done! Now just go up and down a few more times until it feels comfortable and natural.”

As with his university studies, Cam proved to be a quick learner, increasing his speed and distance each time without further mishap.

“Right, it’s time to try some cornering,” David said. “Go down to the end then loop around the oval. I’ll be right beside you.”

Reaching the end of the field, Cam turned the handlebars like he’d turn the steering wheel of a car, only to suddenly find himself sliding along the grass on his back with the bike’s wheels pointing skywards.

“Sorry, I should have told you,” David said as he helped him up. “You don’t turn with the handlebars, you have to lean into the corner and let the handlebars follow. Remember the vector diagram I drew? When you try to turn a rotating wheel, it responds by tipping over, so instead you have to tilt it into the curve and it’ll respond by turning.”

“Oh right, I get it now, I think.” Cam scrambled back onto his bike, built up a moderate speed and gently tilted into a corner. After a few wobbles, he began cornering a lot more confidently,

picking up speed and performing increasingly tighter figure-eights.

“Bravo Cam!” David said as Cam pulled up beside him. “Now all you have to learn is how to use the gears.”

“Gears?”

With Cam having mastered his gear changes, they cycled back to the town centre, leaving their bikes in the parking racks next to the lagoon.

“Let’s swim out to the pontoon,” David said.

“Okay.”

David reached it first, grabbing hold of the rope around the side before pulling himself up onto the deck. Cam took the easier option of the aluminium ladder.



“That was fun,” he said. “Now what?”

Stepping over to him and looking like he was about to say something, David instead pushed him off the edge.

Spluttering as he surfaced, Cam swam back to the side, grabbing hold of the rope and rocking the pontoon until David toppled off. Hoisting himself up, Cam tried to reclaim the high ground but David grabbed hold of his foot, pulling him back into the water.



While David hoisted himself back onto the pontoon, Cam swam around to the ladder, climbing up before he could be pushed off again. He looked across to the southern side of the island.

“Davo, which of those mountains is the one we’re going to climb?”

“You mean Mount Gower? It’s the one at the end; the closer one is Mount Lidgbird.”

“Is there a way to climb it too?”

“Nah, its summit is surrounded by cliffs, but there’s a walk up to a cave at their base.”

“That sounds like it might be fun.”

“Yes, it’s called the Goat House cave as there used to be mountain goats living there. We can go tomorrow morning if you like.”

“Okay.”

“We should buy some supplies at the general store then and, um, I’m hungry so we can grab some lunch too.”

Cam patted his stomach. “I think it was lunch time a couple of hours ago.”

“In that case I’ll race you back to the shore.”

Before Cam could turn, David leapt into the water. He sighed before diving in after him.

“This is so yummy,” Cam said, hoeing into his fish and chips.

“It’s all local produce,” David said, “so it’s nice and fresh. We’d better not have this *every* day, though, otherwise our girths will start expanding.”

“Not with all the climbing you have planned. We’ll be skinnier than ever by the time we’re back at the university.”

David chuckled. “Once we’ve finished, we should wander over the road and book a table for dinner.”

Cam glanced across at the restaurant. “Yeah, it looks nice. I hope we can get a table outside on the deck.”

With their lunch completed, they ambled across, pausing to study the menu displayed next to the entrance.

“Can I help you?” the young man in an apron asked.

“Yes, we’d like to book a table for tonight if that’s okay.”

“Of course, is it just the two of you?”

“Yep.”

“Would you prefer inside or out?”

“Outside will be great.”

“That’s fine; I’ll just get your name and where you’re staying.”

“It’s David Collins and we’re at the *Barefoot Bliss*.”

The waiter glanced down at their bare feet. “I should’ve guessed.”

“You don’t have, um, any dress rules, do you?”

“No, you’re fine as you are. Some of the other restaurants on the island are a bit fussy but as long as you enjoy your meal and pay the bill, we’re happy regardless of what you’re wearing.”

“That’s great!”

“We’re all pretty laid back and relaxed here, as I’m sure you’ll discover during your stay.”

David grinned. “Thanks.”

“What now?” Cam asked as they stepped back outside.

“I was thinking we could ride north along the waterfront to explore the Old Settlement, then go and do a bit of snorkelling at Ned’s Beach.”

“Sounds good; lead on.”

\* \* \*

David and Cam arrived at the restaurant shortly after sunset. From their table on the decking, they watched twilight descend across the lagoon while nibbling herb bread and sipping their chosen wine.

Cam drew in a deep breath. “This is just so amazingly beautiful; I’m sure I must be dreaming.”

“Yeah, they reckon Shimmel is the holiday planet of choice but I doubt any of their resorts would come close to this, for my tastes anyway.”

“These days all the good places on Shimmel are crowded and noisy and those that aren’t are crap. This place is just magically serene.”

David looked into Cam’s eyes, gently smiling. “I’m so glad to hear you say that. After what we went through over the last few months, serenity is just what we need.”

Cam looked around at the dozen or so other diners spread throughout the restaurant. “So why aren’t there more people here?”

“They limit the visitors to four hundred and it really only fills up during the summer holiday period. This is off-season at the moment.”

“I don’t see why; I think the weather’s quite nice.”

“Most like it a bit warmer and there’s also less rain in the summer.”

“Oh, okay.”

The waiter brought their main courses to the table. “Enjoy.”

“We will.”

“This is even better than the fish and chips,” Cam said between mouthfuls. “Is it local produce too?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Cam took another mouthful, smiling and nodding as he chewed.

“I felt like such a dork not being able to ride that bike today,” Cam said after finishing his dessert.

“No, not at all, we all have to go through our first ride at some point. I know someone who didn’t buy a bike until he was thirty and he took a lot longer than you to master it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’m proud of you Cam, I really am, the way you persisted in spite of all your tumbles and spills. If it had been me, I’d have just said *bugger this, let’s hire a car.*”

“I never thought of that.”

Out across the lagoon, the first stars began to appear as the twilight transitioned into night. Cam took another sip of wine before turning to look deep into David's eyes. "Thank you so much for bringing me here, Davo. This is so beautiful and amazing; I want this moment to last forever."

"It will, Cam, in our hearts it always will no matter what the future brings."

## **The Goat House Cave**

After stopping off for breakfast at the Anchorage restaurant, David and Cam cycled south along Lagoon Road, looping around the airport, past the golf course and along a side road next to a resort to the bike racks at the start of the hiking track.

“Phew, I’m worn out already,” Cam said, pulling his water bottle from his backpack.

“Yeah, that headwind past the airport made it tough.”

Once rested and refreshed, they hoisted their backpacks and began their walk. Entering a gully, the track criss-crossed a creek a couple of times before starting to climb along the end of a spur. Cam stopped, stepping over to the side while scratching his head.



“What sort of tree is this, Davo? It looks like it has more trunks than branches.”

“It’s a banyan, a type of fig tree that’s native to the island. Those are aerial roots, not trunks, and they support the canopy so a single tree can spread over many hundreds of metres.”

“Gosh, that’s amazing!”

“Yeah, there are a lot of unique plants here. Even the Kentia palm trees you can see everywhere are only found here.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s the isolation; the nearest other land is the mainland to the west or perhaps Norfolk Island to the east, so seeds that were carried here by ocean currents millions of years ago have evolved differently to the parent species.”

“Something similar happened with the bunyips on Cornipus, didn’t it?”

“Yes, you’re right; I’d forgotten about that. They called it genetic drift.”

“Your dad figured it out, didn’t he?”

“It was a team effort by everyone involved. Even Joel played a part.”

Cam chuckled as David turned and strode forward up the track. Hoisting his backpack, he followed along behind. After a steep section with numerous tree roots threatening to trip an unwatchful climber, the track began to level out as it reached a saddle point at the top of the ridge. Here David stopped and sat on a rock, pulling out his water bottle and taking a long sip.

“They call this Smoking Tree Ridge,” Cam said, studying the map he’d grabbed from his pack. “Did a tree catch fire along here once?”

“No, it got its name from the Kentia seed gatherers who had to carry their gatherings across this ridge from Boat Harbour down below. They’d stop here at the crest to rest under that big tree and have a smoke.”

“A what?”

“I guess that’s something you didn’t pick up from Mum’s English lesson, but I’m not surprised since the practice has mostly died out, along with a lot of the practitioners. Long ago it used to be a common addiction on Earth to breathe the smoke of burning tobacco leaves.”

“How odd.”

“Yes, they eventually discovered all the harmful effects it caused and, when enough people stopped, it was no longer profitable for the cigarette makers to stay in business and that was it.”

“Have you ever smoked, Davo?”

“Don’t be daft, Cam. Do I look like someone who wants to be unhealthy and die young?”

“Well...”

David poked him in the ribs. “The ironic thing is that, thanks to the Eridanians who wouldn’t touch anything more addictive than their revolting tea, we now have effective treatments for most smoking-related ailments, although I’ve heard it said that the cure is often worse than the disease.”

“That’s good.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If the cure was pleasant there’d be no deterrent.”

David smiled at him, nodding slightly before standing and stretching. “Come on Doctor Cam, we have a hill to climb and sitting here won’t make it any less steep.”

From the saddle point, the track south rose gently for a few hundred metres, making Cam think it was becoming a pretty easy walk, but then the ground steepened with occasional rock and root steps. Soon they came to a rope section needing all four limbs to ascend.

“This is hot work,” Cam said when they reached the rock ledge at the top of the rope. He pulled the water bottle from his pack and took another long sip.

“Just remember it’ll be easier going back down,” David said, doing the same.



A short distance ahead, the track reached a vertical rock face where it turned ninety degrees left. Hugging the base of the cliff, it continued up along a narrow ledge with more ropes to hold onto.

After rounding a slight bend and scrambling up a steep section of rock, Cam reached an opening in the cliff face. “Is this it?”

“Almost,” David said, coming up behind him. “Go up the rope climb at the back to get onto the top level.”

Once up, Cam turned to take in the view. “Oh wow, just wow!”





“Worth the climb, huh?”

“You bet!”

Stretched out before them were the pale blue waters of the sheltered lagoon fringed by the golden sand of Lagoon Beach, with Mount Eliza to the left and the Admiralty Islands just off the coast to the right. As they watched, an aircraft circled above before coming in to land on the runway.

“Look Davo, I can see that pontoon we swam out to yesterday!”

“Yeah, and if we had binoculars we’d be able to see ourselves on it.”

“Could we really? But...”

David grinned. “Oh Cam, you’re such a child of innocence.”

“I suppose if there was a fold in the space-time continuum we could do it. Is that possible?”

“Maybe you should make that your research project when we go back to uni.”

“Don’t talk about going back; I just want to live in the moment here.”

“Yeah, me too.”

David was about to wrap Cam in a hug when a group of people entered the cave from the far end, all looking way overdressed for the climb in long pants, long sleeved shirts and heavy hiking boots. Following them in, though, was one that wasn’t.

“David, Cam, fancy seeing you up here!” the young man in board shorts and bare feet said, grinning as he made his way around the group towards them.

“Hi Nate! Are you running a guided tour or something?”

“Yeah, something like that. One of the lodges pays me to take their guests to some of the island’s scenic treasures.”

“Treasures is right,” Cam said. “You couldn’t ask for anything better than this.”

“Wait till I get you up on Mount Gower. This is just a prelude for what you’ll see from up there.”

“We’re looking forward to it,” David said.

“So am I; it’s been ages since I’ve had anyone barefoot in the climbing party and now I’ll have two at once, or three if you count me too.”

“That surprises me, given how friendly this island is to bare feet, what with no snakes, prickles or other nasty surprises.”

“Yeah, most of the local kids do the climb barefoot at least once; it’s become something of a right of passage. Try to convince the tourists, though, and they just shake their heads in disbelief.”

“That’s something we get a lot of,” David said. “I saw you came in from the far end of the cave, is there anything interesting out there we should look at?”

“Yes, follow the track around the point and you’ll get a good view of Balls Pyramid.”

“Awesome, thanks Nate.”

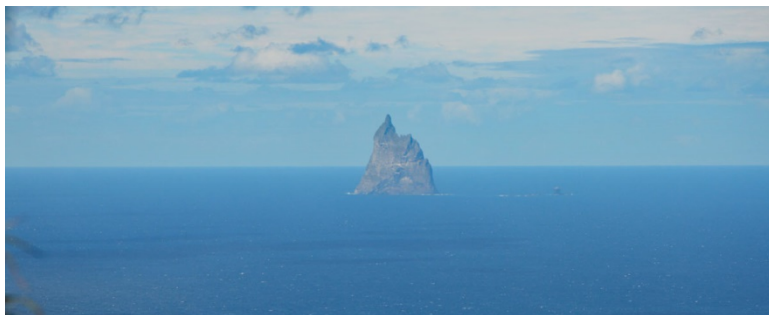
“I’d better try to get this mob back down in one piece before they get restless, so enjoy the rest of your day and I’ll see you on Gower.”

Nate scampered down to the lower level where his group awaited him. David stood, beckoning Cam to follow as he made his way to the end of the cave and the track leading around the point.

“Be careful, Cam, this track’s pretty narrow and there’s a steep drop-off on the left.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

Some fifty metres along, the view opened to the south-east.



“Is that another volcano?” Cam asked.

“Yes and no, it’s a part of the same underlying eruption but it came from a different vent.”

“Do people climb it?”

“A few have but I think you need special permission. There’s a rare insect species living there.”

Cam scratched his head. “You mean like the big one on that branch over there?”

“Yeah, that’s the one; they call it a phasmid.” David flicked his fingers. “I remember now that fifty years ago they eradicated the rats and mice that had wiped out the phasmids on the island so they could reintroduce them.”

“Cool, an environmental success story.”

“Yep.”



After Cam had finished photographing both Balls Pyramid and the phasmid, David turned to begin walking back to the cave but was stopped by a loud crack from behind him, followed half a second later by a dull thud.

“What was that?” Cam asked, almost dropping his camera.

“I don’t know but it sounded pretty close. Let’s take a look.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, but just watch your step as the ground’s pretty steep and it’s a long way to the bottom.”

“I thought you were supposed to be the rough and tumble one.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. In that case I’ll watch my own step.”

After some fifty metres of inching their way through thick scrub on the steep ground, they reached a more level open area at the base of a vertical cliff.

“What the –” David started to say.

“Shush.”

A short distance ahead and tucked into a crevice stood a lattice of scaffolding, while scattered on the ground around it were sizeable lumps of cut basalt rock. Cam jumped as a rock saw started from somewhere inside the crevice.

“Take some photos,” David whispered.

Cam pulled his camera back out, crouching to stay out of sight while taking a series of shots at different zoom levels.

David pointed to just past the crevice. “Look, is that the back end of a subspace shuttle hidden in the bushes?”

“Yeah, it looks like it.” Cam set his camera to maximum zoom and steadied it against a tree while taking more shots. “We’d better go before someone spots us.”

“No, wait, I want to grab a sample of the rock they’re mining.”

“Don’t be stupid, Davo.”

“It’s okay, the noise of that rock saw will cover me. I’m the rough and tumble one, remember?”

Cam sighed, watching nervously as David crept closer to the mine while hugging the cliff to stay out of sight. He thought about following but decided that if they were captured or killed there’d be no-one to raise the alarm. He sighed again, keeping his camera at the ready to at least provide pictures of David’s demise.

About twenty metres from the scaffolding, David saw some smaller offcuts he thought he could safely reach. Taking a good look around to make sure he was unobserved, he crept forward

again. Just as he picked up a good-sized piece, the rock saw stopped.

“Shit,” he whispered, before taking a deep breath and dashing as noiselessly as he could towards the cover of the scrub. Not daring to look back, he crawled through the undergrowth to where Cam was waiting, hoping his dark skin would provide additional camouflage.

Cam let out the breath he’d been holding as David emerged from the bushes.

“Got one,” he said, holding up the rock.

“Fine, now can we get out of here before they set the dogs on us?”

“Dogs? Shit, I didn’t think of that. Do you think they’d have any?”

“How would I know?”

David shrugged. “Come on, then.”

Cam followed him carefully along the steep ground to the track, mumbling obscenities under his breath while repeatedly looking back for any pursuit. He breathed a sigh of relief when they finally rounded the spur and re-entered the Goat House cave.

“Hopefully we’ll catch up with Nate before we reach the bottom,” David said while scampering down the rope to the lower level. “I get the feeling this is something he and his dad will want to know about.”

“What do you think they’re doing?”

“That rock they’re digging out looks awfully like the stuff Joel found on Ignus. My guess is they’re mining fractal ore.”

“Gosh! Is that why you wanted a sample?”

“Yep.”

They proceeded down the mountain as fast as they could without risking a slip or a fall, but their hopes faded as they reached the Smoking Tree saddle without catching up to Nate.

“It seems his bunch of yuppies are faster on their feet than they look,” David said.

“Well they are going downhill.”

“Yeah, good point. Come on, maybe we’ll catch them at the road.”

They dashed out onto the road just as Nate was escorting the last of his party onto the minibus.

“Hey Nate, wait!” David yelled.

“What’s up guys?” he said as he ambled over to them. “Do you need a ride back?”

“No, we were – huff – wondering if you know about – huff – the mining around the back of the – huff – spur behind the Goat House cave.”

“Mining? What mining?”

“Cam, show him your photos while I catch my breath.”

Cam pulled out his camera, with Nate squinting at the tiny screen as he displayed each shot.

Nate pulled a card from his wallet. “Do you reckon you could stop off at my place on your way back to the lodge? By the time you get there on your bikes I should have this lot dropped off and be back. I’d like to take a look at your photos on my big screen.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Great!”

David and Cam returned to their bikes, mounting them as Nate drove off.

“If you want to make a slight detour into the airport,” David said as Cam started pedalling, “I’ll buy you an ice cream.”

“Okay, but I’ll buy you one too. I think we’ve both earned them.”

Nate was already back by the time David and Cam arrived. He ushered them into his living room where a couple in their early fifties stood to greet them.

“Hi, I’m Matt and this is my wife Teagan.”

“I’m David and that’s Cam,” David said, shaking each of their offered hands.

“Yes, your grandfather Jason’s told me all about you.”

David gulped.

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t anything too bad. Nate told us you’ve come across some unauthorised mining on Mount Lidgbird.”

“Yes, we went around the bend from the cave to see Balls Pyramid and heard a crack and a thump so went to investigate.”

Nate opened a photo of Mount Lidgbird on his screen. “This was taken from Mount Gower looking at the back of Lidgbird, with the Goat House cave just around the base of that cliff in the far right hand corner. Can you show us where the mine is?”

David moved the pointer. “About here I’d say.”



“Okay, well it’s no wonder nobody’s noticed them. Can we see your photos?”

Cam handed Nate his camera, which he plugged into his terminal.

“There was this scaffolding and pile of cut rocks,” Cam said, stepping through his shots, “and then we saw this shuttlecraft hiding in the bushes.”

“There’s no way anyone on the island would have approved that,” Matt said. “Both mountains are part of the Permanent Park Preserve and are protected from any development.”

“Davo thinks they might be mining fractal ore,” Cam said.

“That’s just a guess,” David said, pulling out the sample he’d collected, “as it looks very similar to basalt and is obviously worth a lot more than just plain rock. Is there anywhere on the island we can get this analysed?”

Nate looked at his father who shook his head. “You’ll have to send it to the mainland for that.”

“That’s fine; granddad’s factory will be able to do it.”

“Just package it up and drop it at the airport.”

“Uh huh.” David stepped closer to the screen after returning the rock to his backpack. “Cam, can you zoom in on the back of that craft?”

“Yeah, just a tick.”

He got as close to the screen as he could without touching it with his nose. “I’m not entirely sure, as it’s still a bit fuzzy, but, well, I think that ship is Eridanian.”



## Mount Eliza

Cam put down his spoon after finishing his muesli. “So what are we doing today?”

“I was thinking a walk along the northern ridge and around to Mount Eliza might be nice.”

“How high is that?”

“Both the ridge and the mountain are about a hundred and fifty metres, although the track drops back down to sea level between the two.”

“Easy peasy, is that what you say?”

“Yes, although it’s tempting fate to say that *before* we’ve done the walk.”

“Well if it turns out to be tougher it’ll be good training for Gower.”

“Your glass is half full indeed.”

Cam looked at his almost-empty glass of orange juice. “No it isn’t.”

“It’s just a saying that means you’re an optimist.” David waved the waiter over. “More orange juice for Cam, please.”

Cam sighed.

Leaving their bikes at the northern end of Lagoon Road, they paused to read the sign describing the Catalina flying boat crash in 1948. David placed an arm around Cam’s shoulder as he read of that terrifying night which claimed the lives of seven of the nine crewmen.

“You’ll have to be careful when you buy that shuttlecraft, Davo,” Cam said. “I don’t want to end my life like that.”

“Yeah.”

They stood in silence, lost in thought as they stared at the sign, imagining what those final seconds must have been like for the airmen when they realised there was no escape from their doom.

Once underway again, they crossed a couple of creeks on wooden bridges before following the path up through a cow paddock complete with disinterested cows and numerous cow pats.

“Watch where you step,” David said as he narrowly missed one that had been freshly dropped.

“Yeah, I guess,” Cam said, but his gaze had been drawn to the pieces of rusting wreckage spread across the hillside.



“There’s not much left of it now,” David said, his voice hushed. “It’s mostly just engine blocks and a few pieces of wing.”

“Why have they left this here?”

“It’s a memorial, a stark reminder of the horrors of war, I guess.”

“A bit too stark,” Cam said, tears now flowing. “Can we move on?”

“Yeah, sure, up this way along the fence line. We should meet the ridge track just around that corner.”

After finding the track, they climbed along rough stone steps for some three hundred metres before reaching a rock ledge looking west over the cow paddock they’d just crossed. Beyond the lush green fields lay the sands of Old Settlement Beach at the northern end of the lagoon, while at their feet was a circular plaque set into the stone.



“Is this another crash memorial?” Cam asked.

“Yeah, it says this is where the plane hit the top of the ridge. If they’d only been a few metres higher –”

“Stop it, Davo, I don’t want to keep thinking about it.”

“Okay, but don’t let it upset you too much; it was over a hundred years ago.”

“Yeah, I know, but still –”

Cam covered his face, his tears now flowing freely. David took hold of his arm, pulling him away from the plaque. “Come on, let’s keep walking.”

The track rose steadily, hugging the seaward side of the spur and at times affording views of waves pounding onto the rocks north of Ned’s Beach. With another burst of altitude, they reached Malabar Hill where the ground to the north plunged vertically down to the water far below. A dozen or more red-tailed tropicbirds rode the updraft off the cliff-face.

“Look at that island with the tunnel under it!” Cam said, pointing out to the group of islands just off the shore. “Do you reckon it’d be possible to go through there on a boat?”



“You’d want to pick a calm day as a wave surging through could smash you against the side.”

“Oh, that wouldn’t be much fun, would it?”

“No, and getting back without a boat could be difficult as the nearest place you could swim ashore would be Ned’s Beach.”

Cam stared at the island for a while. “It’d be nice if we could, though, on a calm day I mean.”

“We can ask Nate about it when we next see him. I’m sure if it’s possible, he would have done it.”

As Cam continued to watch, a large wave broke against the far side of the island, sending up a spray of foam and a surge of white water through the tunnel. “Um, I might have second thoughts after seeing that.”

“Yeah, I don’t think either of us is rough-and-tumble enough for it, at least not today.”

Cam placed an arm around David’s shoulder as they both stood watching and waiting for the next wave, which was even bigger and sent an explosion of water through the tunnel.

“That one would have really hurt,” David said. “Come on, we’d best keep moving.”

The track west headed steeply downhill for a few hundred metres to a saddle point, before heading just as steeply back up again. This continued several more times, although not as steeply, before the view opened out to the south at the top of a rise.

“Look, Davo, I can see Balls Pyramid poking up behind that hill!”





“Yeah, we’re lucky it’s a clear day otherwise we’d have missed that.”

“Can we see the Goat House cave from here?”

“I guess so, since we could see where we’re standing from the cave. It’d be near the left hand edge of Mount Lidgbird at the bottom of the lowest lot of cliffs.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“It’s just that I’d thought we’d climbed higher up the mountain, that’s all.”

“No, the Goat House cave is only a little over half way up. We’ll get to walk all the way to top of Mount Gower though, and that’s over a hundred metres higher than the top of Mount Lidgbird.”

Cam gulped. “Uh huh.”

David placed an arm around his shoulder. “You’ll be fine, I promise.”

Cam opened his mouth to say something but then thought better of it, instead just nodding and turning back to the track.

Continuing west, they headed slightly down to another saddle point before starting a steep climb towards a rocky outcrop at the top of the rise. Here, a sign informed them they were at Kim’s Lookout. David grabbed Cam’s camera to take a photo of him in front of the view.



Cam turned back to the sign. "It says this is a memorial to Kim Norris who loved these hills but died at the age of twenty."

"Yeah, it's pretty sad I guess."

"There's too much death on this walk, Davo, too much."

"It was a long time ago, Cam, over a hundred years, but we can still share the joy he had from walking up here and taking in the views."

"Yeah, I guess, but –"

David wrapped him in a hug, rubbing his hand up and down Cam's back until he'd calmed.

From the lookout, the track turned south, heading downhill to a junction at a saddle point. Here a sign pointed left to Settlement Beach and right to North Beach and Mount Eliza.

"We go right," David said.

"Yes, I figured that out for myself."

"Sorry."

The track became a twisting flight of steps as it descended a hundred and thirty metres to almost sea level.

"Do we have to go back up this?" Cam asked as they reached the bottom.

"That depends on the tide."

"Huh?"

"If it's low enough we can walk around the point, but otherwise yeah, it's back up and over the top to Settlement Beach. Just think of it as training for Mount Gower."

"I should have kept my mouth shut at breakfast."

Cam shook his head as he continued forward, the damp sandy track now level and with palm trees on either side. In a short while they reached the North Beach picnic shelter.

"This looks like a good place for lunch," David said, pulling off his backpack. "Are you hungry?"

"No."

David put a hand on Cam's shoulder. "What's wrong, Cam?"

“I, I can’t stop thinking about those airmen and Kim. They’d have been about our age, Davo, but their lives ended –” He flicked his fingers. “They ended just like that before they’d even really begun.”

“Sometimes bad things happen, Cam, but dwelling on them won’t change them.”

“What about singletons like Joel, they can change things, can’t they? Why couldn’t they have got a singleton to make things right?”

“Do you remember the time nexus?”

“What nexus?”

“Oh right, you weren’t with us then, well I didn’t even know you then, duh. Well anyway, it was a nexus of all possible time lines and inside there were smooth bits and crinkly bits. The crinkly bits were where there were multiple time lines but in the smooth bits there was only one possible line.”

“So in a smooth bit of the continuum, a singleton wouldn’t be able to change anything, right?”

“Exactly, and granddad Jason told me that the crinkly bits are not only rare but highly localised. Singletons can only do their thing if they’re in the right place and time.”

“Oh, I see, so if one of us died now there’d be nothing the other one could do.”

“Don’t be so morbid, Cam. Neither of us is going to die until we’re old and senile.”

“But what if –”

“There are no *what-ifs*, Cam. There’s the past that’s set in stone and the present that we’re in right now, but the future’s just an illusion and worrying about it won’t change anything, it’ll just make you miserable and grumpy.”

Cam sat staring into the trees for several minutes, his face an expressionless mask, before finally reaching down into his backpack and pulling out his map.

“It says the Old Gulch and Herring Pools are just over there,” he said, pointing north. “What’s a gulch?”



“I have no idea. That can be your research project for tonight.”

“All right.”

Cam stood and strode off towards the gulch, hoisting his backpack as he went and leaving David dashing to keep up.

The sandy trail wound its way through the forest of palm trees before emerging onto a pebble beach facing north out to sea between a pair of headlands.

“I guess this is the gulch,” David said as he caught up. He pulled out his own map. “The pools are around along the headland on the right.”

Cam again set off without responding, slowing only when he reached the jumble of fallen boulders along its base.



David decided there was no point trying to catch up to him and risk twisting an ankle on a loose rock, so instead took his time to pick the easiest way through.

By the time he reached the pools, he found Cam had ditched his shorts and was floating naked on his back in the middle of the largest one. Removing his own shorts and dumping them on top of Cam's, he waded in to join him.

“This water's so warm,” Cam said as he approached.

“Yes, it is quite nice and so clear too.”

“I guess it’s like that beach near your home with no runoff from nearby streams to cloud it.”

“Uh huh.”

David took a deep breath before diving below the surface to take a look at the bluish-green rocks on the bottom. Cam followed him down where they swam around, circling each other underwater before finally surfacing.



“What gives the rocks that colour?” Cam asked.

“It’s probably some sort of algae but I’m not sure; marine botany wasn’t something I paid much attention to in school.”

“They didn’t teach marine botany at my school, probably because we were nowhere near any seas or lakes.”

A wave splashed over the rocks separating the pool from the sea, sending a surge of frothy water over them.

David laughed. “Your hair’s full of froth, Cam.”

“So’s yours.”

“This is what we’ll look like when we’re a hundred years old.”

“Nah, we’ll probably be bald.”

“Not me; there’s no baldness in either side of my family tree.”

“My father started losing his hair soon after my sister was born; he reckoned it was nature’s way of telling him he’d fathered enough children.”

“In that case, since I’m unlikely to become pregnant, you have nothing to worry about.”

Cam laughed, giving David hope that his morbid melancholy had passed.

“Anyway we have a cure for baldness now, thanks to the Eridanians, although the treatment’s pretty expensive.”

“That’s interesting, I’m sure some entrepreneurial Eridanian could make a fortune on Hazler if they wanted to.”

“I don’t think Eridanians are much interested in money.”

“So why are they cutting fractal ore out of Mount Lidgbird?”

“Good point.”

They both dived under again to wash the froth out of their hair before swimming back to the edge.

“Where to now?” Cam asked.

“Mount Eliza.”

Cam went to grab his shorts but David stopped him. “I haven’t seen anyone else over on this side of the island so we can probably stay as we are for the climb and let the sun and breeze dry us.”

Stuffing their shorts into their backpacks, they returned to the start of the Mount Eliza track at the picnic shelter. Emerging from the forest of palm trees into grassland, they got their first view of the trail ahead up along the spine of what Cam thought looked like the back of giant lizard.

“It’s odd how all the hills along the northern edge of the island rise up gently like this only to drop off as cliffs down to the sea.”

“Yeah, I think the ridge here was part of the rim of the volcano’s caldera, with its centre back west of the lagoon. The cliffs were then formed by the sea undercutting the rock.”



“That makes sense. Maybe you should’ve become a geologist instead of an astrophysicist.”

“Then I wouldn’t have met you.”

Cam opened his mouth to say something but had second thoughts, instead grinning before turning to the track ahead.

The summit offered a good view back east along those cliff lines, which weren’t quite as vertical as Cam had thought when looking down from the top. Still, it wasn’t the sort of slope he’d want to tumble down.



Making their way around the summit, they reached a vantage point looking back along the western seafront, revealing some large sea caves cut into the rock.

“Do you reckon those will eventually turn into gulches?” Cam asked.

“Whatever gulches are, but yeah, I suppose they could if they erode right through that saddle to the gully on the other side.”

Cam pulled out his map. “Hey, they’re actually called the New Gulch.”



“There you go; maybe we should have both become geologists.”

“I think astrophysics is more fun.”

“Yeah, it is.” David pulled off his backpack. “Are you hungry yet?”

Cam stared out over the water for a few moments. “I must be I suppose.”

David handed him a salad roll. “Get this into you then before I starve to death.”



Cam poked out his tongue before taking a large bite. “This is nice.”

“After all the walking we’ve done today, *anything* would be nice.”

Their lunch eaten, they started making their way back down, pausing at a vantage point to the left of the track that offered an uninterrupted view over North Bay.



“Do you reckon we’ll be able to get around the edge of the bay instead of going back over the top?” Cam asked.

“I think so, it looks like the tide’s fairly low and the water’s calm.”

“Is that a boat down there on the beach?”

“Yeah, I guess we’d better put our shorts back on before we have company. Public nudity is no longer a misdemeanour like it was in my grandfather’s day, but is still considered impolite amongst strangers.”

They’d just donned their shorts and started walking again when a young man and woman appeared on the track in front of them, both naked.

“Sorry,” the man said, blushing. “We didn’t see any other boats over here and thought we’d have the mountain to ourselves.”

“We walked across the top from Malabar Hill,” David said. “No need to apologise, we only just put our shorts on when we saw your boat.”

He wasted no time whipping his shorts back off. Cam shrugged before doing the same.

“I’m Brenda and this is my husband Nigel,” the woman said. “It’s great to see some other naturists on the island.”

“I’m Cam and that’s Davo,” Cam said. “We’re students on Cornipus so don’t normally wear clothes.”

“That sounds like an amazing place,” Nigel said. “We hope to visit there someday.”

“I was born on Bluehaven but spent most of my childhood on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast,” David said, “so I didn’t wear clothes much unless I really had to.”

“Cool,” Nigel said, grinning.

“Will you be walking back along the top?” Brenda asked. “That’s a long hike.”

“We’re thinking of going around the water’s edge to Old Settlement Beach if the tide’s low enough.”

“If you can’t get around and don’t mind waiting a bit, we can give you a ride back in our boat.”

“Thanks, that’d be great!”

“No worries.”

“Enjoy your walk; there are some nice views from the top.”

“There are nice views everywhere on this island.”

“Too right!”

Waving as Brenda and Nigel continued on their way to the summit, David and Cam resumed their descent. They paused at a point where the track crossed the head of a gully, giving them a view down into the Old Gulch.

“The water looks so blue from up here,” Cam said.

“Yes, I think it’s due to the white coral sand on the bottom. Water absorbs red light so what we see reflected back out is predominantly blue.”



“Gosh, is there anything you don’t know, Davo?”

David shrugged. “I grew up on the coast so I was always fascinated by the sea and how it tied in with the physics I was learning.”

“I wish I’d had that opportunity.”

“You’re still young, Cam, and I promise once we’ve finished our studies we can live by the sea.”

“That’d be awesome, thanks!”

Continuing down, they soon reached the sand of North Beach. David ran over to Brenda’s and Nigel’s boat, examining the sand where it had been pulled out of the water.

“It looks like the tide’s still going out,” he said as Cam caught up with him. “We should be okay walking around unless you really want to take the trail back over the top.”

“No, I’d rather go around than over.” Cam paused to pull his water bottle from his backpack, taking several long sips. “I really wasn’t fancying that climb.”



“It’d be extra training for Gower.”

“If I do any more training for it, my joints will be worn out before I even set foot on the mountain.”

“Poor Cam.” David ruffled his hair. “Come on then, we’d better go before the tide changes its mind.”

The sandy beach soon gave way to scree below the point, making their progress slow and tedious. In places they were able to wade out onto sand to bypass the rocks, but such relief was short-lived as the sand became home to thick beds of seaweed whenever they ventured too far out.

Finally, with the sun dipping low on the horizon and legs well on the way to turning into rubber, they reached the sand of Old Settlement Beach.

“Nearly there,” David said, pulling out his water bottle again. “Our bikes are just up behind the end of the beach.”

\* \* \*

Once back at the *Barefoot Bliss*, David opened the ultranet terminal while Cam flopped onto the sofa.

“Hey, my granddad’s replied about that rock sample I sent him,” David said. “He said it’s definitely intergalactic-grade fractal ore, except its fluorescence spectrum shows a pair of lines in the yellow region which he thinks might be sodium contamination.”

“Could that be because this island began life as an underwater volcano, with seawater reacting with the molten rock?”

“You’re probably right, but he goes on to say that they’ve found the same anomaly in the fractal crystals that have been causing the instability problems he mentioned before. He said they’re doing a supply chain audit to see if those crystals might have originated from the illegal mining here.”

“That’s interesting but, um, I’m not sure how those yellow sodium lines could interfere with the predominately orange resonance in intergalactic transport crystals.”

David laughed. "Apparently Peter said the same thing and they're all still scratching their heads."

"I, I'm sure they'll figure it out once —"

"Once what?" David asked, but when he turned he saw Cam had fallen asleep.

Returning to the terminal, he sent off a reply before going to the Anchorage Restaurant's page to book a table for dinner.

\* \* \*

"I hope you're hungry now," David said as they studied the menu.

"I'm ravenous actually. Look, I'm sorry I got upset during the walk, I guess I'm a bit of a, what is it you say, a bit of a sook."

"No, not at all, Cam. From what you've told me of your childhood on Hazler, where death was celebrated as enhancing the gene pool, I can barely imagine how confronting those memorials would have been for you. You're not a sook, no way, you're just the wonderfully sensitive child of innocence I fell helplessly in love with."

"But —" Cam started to say but was interrupted as the waiter arrived to fill their wine glasses and take their meal order.

David raised his glass. "To a life of innocence and love."

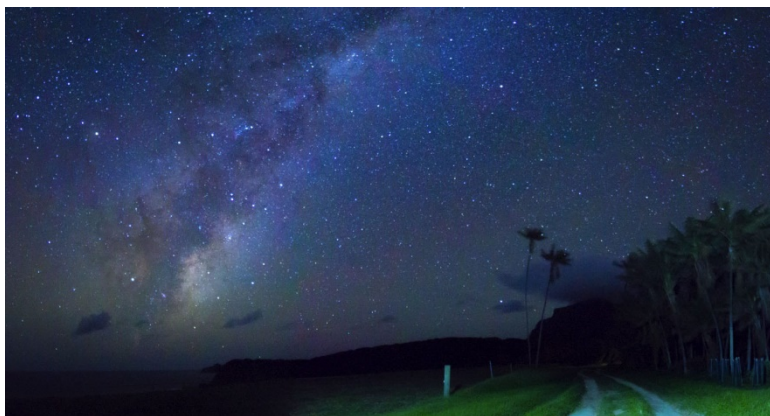
"I guess," Cam said, raising his. David sighed.

David glanced skywards as they left the restaurant. "There's no cloud tonight and the moon doesn't rise until the early hours, so do you fancy stopping off at Ned's Beach on the way back for some star-gazing?"

"Yeah, sounds good. After my nap earlier I'm wide awake now."

Taking the left fork in the road near the top of the hill, they headed down to the beachfront with starlight their only illumination. Where they passed under a grove of trees it was totally dark, so they used their bare soles to follow the centre of

the road's camber. Once on the sand, they stretched out side by side to take in the magnificent vista overhead.



“That band of light where there are a lot more stars, is that the galactic plane?” Cam asked.

“Yes, they call it the Milky Way and it’s where our galaxy gets its name from.”

“Oh, right. Back home, your galaxy looks like a milky smudge through a small telescope so it’s commonly called the Milk Spot.”

“Fancy that, hey?”

“Where’s the galactic core? I can’t see any part that looks bright enough to be it.”

“No, it’s hidden behind dust clouds so is only visible to radio telescopes. Do you see that spiral of stars that looks like a scorpion’s tail?”

“What’s a scorpion?”

“It’s an arachnid with a venomous stinger at the end of its curly tail.” David leaned over across Cam’s chest. “Do you see where I’m pointing?”

“Yes, I see it now.”

“The galaxy’s core is just to the left of that.”

Cam scratched his head. "It's a pity about all that dust. So where's the planet those ore-smugglers are from?"

"Eridani?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"It's on the wrong side of us at this time of year, but come back in three or four months and you'll see it."

"Oh, okay."

David pointed out to the south. "See those two patches of light that look like clouds?"

"Yes."

"They're our two neighbouring galaxies, the large and small Magellanic Clouds. They each have about ten billion stars."

"This is just so amazing; I've seen photos like this but have never been anywhere with a dark enough sky to come even close to it."

David swivelled around before resting his head back on Cam's chest and pointing up. "Do you see those four stars in the Milky Way that form a cross?"

"Yes."

"That's called the Southern Cross and the dark region next to it is the Coal Sack."

"Uh huh. Is that more dust?"

"Yep. Come back to the left now and you'll see two very bright stars. Those are the Pointers because they point to the cross, and the one furthest from the cross is our nearest neighbour, Alpha Centauri."

"That's a double star, isn't it?"

"Yes, Alpha Centauri A and B orbit each other at about the same distance as the gas giants of our solar system. There's a third star in the system too, a red dwarf called Proxima Centauri, but its orbit is almost a quarter of a light year away from the other two. I wonder what it'd be like living on a planet with two suns."

"Probably not very pleasant as, in such a system, any planetary orbits are likely to be chaotic. A planet could do thousands or even millions of nice circular orbits only to be suddenly flung into

wild loop-the-loops and even flip to the other star or be ejected completely from the system.”

David chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m just thinking about all the science fiction stories from last century that had interstellar explorers flying off at sub-light speed to colonise Earth-like planets in that system.”

“There was a research fellow at Apogee University who wrote the definitive paper on orbital instability in binary systems.”

“Was it anyone we know?”

“It was a bit before our time, like five hundred years ago. He was more a mathematician than a physicist and was considered something of a heretic as he kept pointing out chaotic solutions in systems that were meant to be well-behaved. His paper on fractal crystal resonances –”

Cam sat up straight, causing David to roll face-first into the sand.

“What’s wrong, Cam?”

“I need to go back and read his paper again, but even though planetary orbits and fractal subspace resonances are quite different phenomena, the equations describing them are pretty much the same. I’m thinking that the double sodium line in the ore sample you sent your grandfather might cause similar instabilities in the subspace couplings as a double star does with its planetary orbits.”

“Really?” David wrapped him in a hug and kissed him on the forehead. “Talk about lateral thinking! You’re brilliant, Cam, bloody brilliant!”

## Mount Gower

Cam and David had just finished their breakfast at the Anchorage Restaurant when Nate pulled up in his minibus.

“That was good timing,” David said as they boarded.

“Are we the only ones doing the climb?” Cam asked, taking in the empty seats.

“No, I have a few more to collect along the way,” Nate said. “There should be twelve all up if no-one’s chickened out.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Yes it does, people book the climb from the comfort of their home but once they’ve done a few of the easier walks on the island they realise they’re out of their depth. I’d rather they did that than get overwhelmed halfway up the mountain, although that happens a bit too.”

“I hope we don’t get overwhelmed.”

“You guys will be fine, from what I saw of you at the Goat House cave.”

Nate pulled into one of the resorts along Lagoon Road. Waiting out the front were Brenda and Nigel, both fully fitted out in long pants, long sleeved shirts and big heavy hiking boots. Cam gave David a puzzled look.

“Are you guys doing the climb today too?” Brenda asked as she saw them.

“Yep,” David said.

She took a closer look at them. “In just board shorts and bare feet?”

“Yeah, we thought we’d better put our shorts on for this.”

“You guys are amazing!”

“What about me?” Nate asked. “That’s all I’m wearing too.”

“That’s all you ever wear, isn’t it?” Nigel said.

“Yep.”

“We thought it might get cold up on the mountain,” Brenda said.

“It could, yeah, but it’s usually pleasant enough at this time of year, especially after all the exertion of climbing.”

“We can always strip off if we get too hot.”

Nate returned to Lagoon Road, heading a short distance along before pulling in at another resort where half a dozen overdressed hikers stood waiting.

“Some of these look familiar from that group at the Goat House cave,” David said.

“Yeah,” Nate said, “they’re from that group, as are the next lot I pick up.”

With all the participants finally on board, Nate headed out around the back of the airport and along to a parking area at the end of the road.

“This is where the walking starts,” he said, opening the door. “If anyone’s having second thoughts, now’s the time to speak up.”

No-one did, instead they all clambered out of the bus and began rummaging through their heavy back-packs. David and Cam, having been the first on, were the last off.

“Down this way,” Nate said once everyone was set, leading them around a gate and along a path lined with palm trees. That continued on for about a kilometre until they reached a cleared area with a few picnic tables. A couple of hikers stopped to grab water and snacks from their packs, with one pulling out a thermos and pouring a cup of tea.

“Are you hungry or thirsty yet, Cam?” David asked.

“No, are you?”

“We’ve only been walking for fifteen minutes along level ground so no, I don’t think I’ve depleted my body’s reserves quite yet.”

“We’re not all as fit as you two,” Brenda said, munching on a muesli bar.

“Sorry, no offence meant. Cam and I had a big breakfast just before Nate picked us up.”

“We did too but that seems like ages ago now.”

Once everyone had finished their snack break, Nate led them down onto a rocky beach and over to a large basalt outcrop near the edge of the water, with some hardy trees growing out the top of it. He stood at its base, beckoning them forward through the scree.



“This is Little Island,” he said, “because with king tides and big seas it does occasionally become an island.”

“Did it fall off the mountain?” someone asked.

“No, it’s just a separate volcanic outcrop that hasn’t quite been eroded away yet. From here we continue along the shore for a couple of hundred metres before the rope scramble up onto the



Lower Road, which is that ledge you can see between the base of the cliff and the greenery.”

“Is it like the rope climbs to the Goat House cave?” Nigel asked.

“Yes, only a bit steeper and higher. The lower road is about a hundred metres up.”

At the beginning of the rope climb, Nate pulled a large box from under a rock ledge. Within were several dozen hard hats which he began handing around. “The cliff face along here occasionally sheds small rocks so head protection is mandatory until we round the corner into Erskines Valley.”

“What about bigger rocks?” Nigel asked. “Has anyone died?”

“Not in the last hundred years that the guided climbs have been running. Larger rocks do occasionally fall but it’s pretty rare and the chance of anyone standing under one at the time is slim.”

“Oh, okay I guess.”

Nate called David and Cam forward once everyone had donned their hats. “You two can go first, as you’re the most nimble, and I’ll shepherd the rest along from behind. Wait in the large open area at the top of the rope climb.”

David ushered Cam ahead of him. Within moments, all he could see were the dusty soles of Cam’s feet heading skywards. Deciding to let him have the honour of beating everyone up by a good margin, David instead paused to pull out his camera and take a photo of the rest of the group struggling along behind.



When David arrived at the top of the climb, Cam was nowhere to be seen. “Cam?”

“I’m right here,” Cam said from behind him.

David spun around to see him sitting on the ground under a palm tree and drawing diagrams in the dirt with a stick. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to get my head around the sodium-induced instabilities in fractal crystals to see if there’s a broader picture emerging.”

“Is there?”

“I’m not sure. The sticks and dirt here are really good, don’t get me wrong, but ultimately I’m going to have to run some computer simulations.”

David grinned. “Maybe I should build you an abacus.”

Before Cam could think of a retort, the rest of the group began appearing at the top of the climb.

“We thought you two would be up at the summit by now,” Brenda said as she and Nigel stepped over to them.

“Nah, I’m sure by the end of the day our legs will be just as sore as everyone else’s.”

With much huffing and puffing, the rest of the group reached the clearing. Several pulled snacks from their packs while the thermos bearer passed around more cups of tea. After doing a head-count, Nate gave a well-rehearsed talk about the Kentia palms, followed by a demonstration of how to climb one using a foot strap.

“Anyone else want a go?” he asked as he slid back down and flicked the strap in the air with his foot.

“Cam?” David asked.

Cam shook his head.

“Nigel and I will,” Brenda said.

Grabbing the strap off Nate, she shimmied up the tree with ease, pausing at the top for Nigel to take a photo before descending. Nigel also made easy work of it.

“Anyone else?” Nate asked.

Everyone looked at David and Cam but they both shook their heads.

“Okay, when everyone’s ready we can move on to the Lower Road, which is a narrow ledge along the base of the cliff. It’s fairly safe and we haven’t lost anyone over the side in all the time we’ve been running the climbs, but please make good use of the rope if you’re at all unsure of your footing.”

This time Brenda and Nigel led the way, with David and Cam close behind.



Up close, the ledge was anything but flat, instead dipping and rising as it worked its way around irregularities in the cliff face. Cam paused to clamber over another outcrop of rock. “I mean, really, in what sense is this a *road*?”

David chuckled. “You weren’t expecting a multi-lane highway, were you?”

“No, but the name *Lower Road* suggested, for this island at least, something that would be passable by bike.”

Nigel turned his head back. “I think it’s a road because it’s the only reasonably level section of this track. Compared to what’s ahead of us, I’m sure it’s a veritable highway.”

Cam shook his head as he eased himself over the rocks while taking care not to step too close to the edge. “Rough and tumble, right Davo?”

“Yep, but try not to tumble if you can avoid it.”

After about a kilometre, the track rounded the end of the spur, with the near vertical cliffs above and below giving way to the heavily vegetated slope on the side of a gully. They waited in a clearing for everyone to catch up.

Nate did a quick head-count before pulling a large box out from behind a bush. “From here it’s a gentle climb through the forest up to Erskine Creek, so you can hand in your hard hats now.” He noticed the thermos-bearer starting to open his pack. “We’ll stop at the creek for some refreshment as there’s a bit more room to spread out up there and the water’s good to drink.”

With the thermos begrudgingly re-stashed, the group pressed on, climbing rough stone steps up another forty metres before the track levelled out. After a few hundred metres of easy walking amongst small palms and mossy rocks, they reached the babbling creek.



David and Cam explored up and down stream a little, pausing where a good flow of water descended over a ledge to top up their water bottles, while the rest of the party squatted down wherever they could and fished snacks from their packs. The thermos was out and being passed around before Nate could even draw breath to say anything, so instead he kept his mouth shut and wandered off to join David and Cam.

“How are you finding the hike so far?” he asked as he put the first of several water bottles under the stream.

“Not too bad,” David said, “the Lower Road wasn’t as scary as I’d imagined.”

“I wouldn’t want to do it without the rope,” Cam said. “I’m fine with heights as long as I have something to hold onto.”

“From what I’ve seen, you two have been doing great, though of course being barefoot makes it a lot easier. They reckon the weight of boots on your feet is ten times as much as in your pack, and having none at all is better yet.”

“Have you always done the guiding barefoot?” David asked.

“I’ve only been doing it for six months, but like most of the kids here, growing up on the island I was barefoot pretty much all the time.”

“That sounds idyllic.”

“It was, well it still is.”

His water bottles full, Nate returned to where the others were sitting. David and Cam looked at each other before following.

“Would you like some tea?” the thermos bearer asked as Nate approached.

“Thanks for offering but no, I’m not really a tea drinker.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing. How high are we here?”

“About a hundred and seventy metres.”

“Is that all?”

“I’m afraid so; there’s still a lot of climbing ahead.”

“Oh well, I thought we must have been higher than that.” He gave his thermos a shake. “I’d better save what’s left for later on.”

Taking that as a cue, Nate climbed onto a boulder from where he could address the whole group. “If everyone’s ready we can press on. The next stop is at the Gower Saddle, about a kilometre horizontally and three hundred metres vertically. Is everyone happy with that?”

Cam wondered what could be changed if someone wasn’t happy with it, but said nothing, instead making sure his water bottles were secure and hoisting his pack. It felt noticeably heavier after the top-up.

Once away from the creek, the track immediately began to climb with a mixture of irregular stone steps, large tree roots and sloping rock. Cam made a mental note to watch his footing to avoid stubbing a toe. He let David take the lead this time, content to let the water in his stomach settle while his thoughts drifted back over fractal resonances and instabilities.

Looking up when he saw there was something big in his way, he realised David had stopped and managed to pull up without quite bumping into him. “What’s wrong?”

“Shush.”

David pointed to the track just ahead of him where some small fluffy birds rummaged in the leaf litter.





“Those are woodhens,” Brenda said, coming up behind him. “They’re flightless birds native to the island.”

“Last century they almost became extinct,” Nate said, having made his way forward to see what the stoppage was. “The pigs that had been introduced onto the island by early settlers found the eggs and chicks an easy meal, so the top of Mount Gower became a last refuge for them. Eventually the pigs were eradicated and, with help from a captive breeding programme, the woodhens were able to repopulate the island and are now thriving.”

“What do they eat?” David asked.

“Mostly insects, worms, snails and the like.”

“Ah, so flight would have been of no use to them for feeding and I guess there were no predators here they’d need to escape from, before the pigs I mean.”

“Yes, that’s right. They found a niche and adapted themselves to it.”

With the woodhens having moved off the path, David started climbing again.

After an hour of steady climbing they reached the Gower Saddle, a rock ledge on the spur joining the two mountains and affording views down both sides of Mount Lidgbird to the coastline. Cameras, water bottles, snacks and the thermos were quickly pulled from backpacks as everyone stopped for a breather.



“How close are we to the summit?” Nigel asked as Nate followed the last of the group up to join them.

“About a kilometre horizontally but there’s almost another three hundred and fifty metres to climb; what we’ve done so far was the easy bit.”

“Oh.”

“In a few hundred metres we’ll reach the Getup Place, which is another rope section up the side of the cliff to the summit area. After that it gets a bit easier.”

David and Cam waited at the Getup Place for the rest to catch up. The day had turned out warmer than expected, with even Nigel and Brenda starting to wilt. Nate brought up the rear along with the thermos bearer, the latter immediately sitting and pulling the thermos and plastic cups from his backpack. The tea-drinkers all gathered around him while Nate wandered over to David and Cam.

“How are you guys going?” he asked.

“Fine,” Cam said, grinning.

“Yeah,” David said, “travelling light has its advantages on a hike like this.”

Nate nodded. “Some of the others are really struggling and there’s talk of them not doing the final ascent. I’ll let them drink their tea and see what they’ve decided.”

Cam scratched his head. “How much tea does that thermos hold? They’ve been drinking from it the whole way up.”

Nate chuckled. “I asked them the same thing; it’s a clever piece of subspace technology that extracts water from the air and heats it up. It’s called a bottomless thermos and they were very popular as gifts last Christmas.”

“Oh right, that’s pretty amazing I guess.”

“They’re great in the humid air we have here but aren’t much good in the desert.”



The thermos bearer stepped over to Nate. "How much further up did you say it was to the summit?"

"The rope section here is about a seventy metre climb, then it's about another forty minutes of a more gentle ascent to the top."

He shook his head. "We've decided it'd be best for us to wait here while you five complete the climb."

"What, all of you?"

"Yes, it's a lot tougher than we expected, particularly with this heat." He tugged at his heavy long-sleeved shirt.

"Okay then." Nate delved into his backpack. "Here, take this radio in case we need to talk and make sure no-one goes wandering off. There are lots of concealed drop-offs around here."

"Don't worry; we're all too bushed to go wandering."

Nate nodded. "Okay, we should be back in about two hours."

"Thanks. Don't worry about us; we'll be fine while you're gone."

Nate turned to Nigel and Brenda as the thermos bearer walked off. "Are you guys ready?"

Brenda took a large swig from her water bottle before returning it to her backpack. "Yep."

He turned to David and Cam. "Lead on!"

"This is tough-going," David said, catching his breath as he reached a ledge at the top of the first rope. He tugged at his shorts. "Now that it's just us, do you mind if I strip off? I can climb much easier without the trappings of civilisation."

"That sounds like an excellent suggestion," Brenda said. "I knew as soon as we started that we were overdressed."

"That's fine with me," Nate said, grinning. "Though I must say this is the first time I've led an all-nude climbing group."

With their clothing tucked safely under a ledge where it couldn't blow away, David started on the next section of rope rising up what was almost a vertical cliff face. "This is much better. Now I know why I hate wearing anything."

Cam chuckled. "You mean you didn't know before now?"

David turned to poke his tongue out, but as he did his foot slipped off the rock. Cam reached up to grab his ankle only to have David's foot land squarely on his shoulder, knocking him off balance.

Seeing what was unfolding, Nigel pushed himself up and wrapped an arm around Cam's thighs to prevent him from slipping. Brenda and Nate, being further back, could do nothing but watch with bated breath.

"Are you guys okay or do you want me to come up?" Nate said.

"I've got a good hold of Cam," Nigel said. "David, are you okay?"

David didn't answer.

"Davo?" Cam asked.

Again there was no answer.

"I think he's in shock," Brenda said.

"I have a harness," Nate said, delving into his backpack. "I think I can squeeze past and get to him."

"Be careful."

"Just doing my job; we train for this sort of thing all the time."

Nate worked his way up and around Nigel and Cam, finding a rock he could stand on from where he could secure the harness around David's waist and clip it to the rope. "You're snug and tight now, mate. Can you lift your foot off Cam's shoulder?"

Slowly David raised his foot, with both Cam and Nate guiding it back onto the rock.

"You can go down now, Cam."

Nigel and Cam inched their way back to the ledge, with Cam's knees trembling between each step. He sat down heavily once he reached the bottom.

"Brenda," Nate said, "in my backpack is a packet of chocolate bars. Could you throw one up to me?"

"Sure."

Nate caught the bar and handed it to David. "Eat this; it'll make you feel better."

“Umph,” David said, but started eating.

“I think Cam could do with one of those too,” Brenda said.

“Sure.”

“Thanks,” Cam said, taking it. “This is nice; I feel better already.”

“Help yourselves to more if you want,” Nate said. “I brought them along to share.” He turned his attention back to David. “How’s that feel now?”

“Okay I guess.”

“Do you want to keep going or head back down?”

David paused for several seconds. “I’ll keep going, I think. If I’m going to fall again, it’d be more likely to happen going down.”

“Just take your time.”

David took a couple of deep breaths before pushing himself up another step.

“Don’t forget to unclip the harness.”

“Oh, right.”

Nate followed a couple of steps behind, ready to grab him should he slip again. Once David had made it to the next ledge, he scampered back down to let the others go up ahead of him.

“This next climb is the last before we reach the summit area,” he said, “but it’s also the longest.”

David grimaced. “I’d better have another piece of chocolate, then, if you have any more to spare.”

“Yes, plenty left, although my backpack’s not as bottomless as the thermos.”

“I guess I’m not as rough and tumble as I thought.”

Cam grimaced.

Once everyone was refreshed and ready, Nigel led the climb, followed by Brenda, Cam, David and Nate.

“I’m at the top,” Nigel finally said. “Gosh, what a view!”

Perched at the top of the cliff, they looked down onto the summit of Mt Lidgbird, with the lagoon, northern ridge and Admiralty Islands stretched out beyond that.



Nate pulled out his radio. “We’ve reached the top of the Getup Place and are about to head cross-country to the summit. How are you guys going down there?”

*“Fine, Judy brought a pack of cards so we’re not dying of boredom yet.”*

“That’s good to know. I’ll call again when we’re at the summit.”

*“Thanks Nate. Thermos out.”*

From the cliff-top, the trail made its way gently uphill through the mosses and ferns of the summit area’s mist forest.

“This is like walking through an enchanted wood,” Brenda said, “and doing it naked adds another dimension on top of that.”

“It sure does,” Nate said. “The humidity, coolness and feeling of closeness from the vegetation are pretty unique here.”

Cam stopped walking to study the unfurling new fronds of a large tree fern. “Hey Davo, these things are fractals, aren’t they?”

David peered over his shoulder. “Yeah, I think you’re right.”

“It has an odd-order symmetry, with each new leaf branching out from opposite sides of the stem. I wonder now; do you remember the way Hamati was exciting the crystals in his lab?”

“Not especially, but I recall that something about it caught your eye.”

“Yes, it was quite different to the way it’s done now. This –” He paused to pull out his camera. “Let me take some shots before I forget the idea that’s starting to form.”

“Is Cam a botanist?” Brenda asked, turning towards them as he was taking his photos.

“Nah,” David said, “he’s a subspace physicist.”

“But –”

“He gets his inspiration from the strangest of things but he’s good, bloody brilliant actually, aren’t you Cam?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

Once Cam had taken all the photos he needed, they moved on, the track rising gently through the forest until, with a final burst of altitude up some rock ledges, they reached the summit.

“Lunch time,” Nate said, squatting on a flat area of rock and rummaging through his backpack, while the others all pulled out cameras.



“I should get a group shot,” he added, pulling out his own camera. “Just for my own private collection, of course.”

“No worries,” Brenda said, “as long as you send us all a copy.”

With Nate’s camera set to timer mode, they gathered along the edge of the rock in front of the view.

“Perfect,” he said after checking the image. He delved back into his pack. “I have some bananas if anyone wants one, as well as more chocolate of course.”

Just as Cam had taken the last bite of his sandwich, a large crack rang out from the direction of Mt Lidgbird. “What was that?”

“Look,” David said, pointing to just above the mountain. “A small cruiser has emerged from subspace.”

A moment later came a bright flash of blue, followed by a much louder boom. Hovering midway between where they sat and the mountain was a huge vessel unlike anything Cam or David had ever seen.

“Cripes!” Nigel said. “That’s a military interdicator.”

## Interdictor

“What’s an interdictor?” Brenda asked.

“In simple terms,” Nigel said, “it’s the subspace equivalent of a gravitational black hole. It prevents anything within range from entering subspace.”

Cam scratched his head. “I wouldn’t have thought that possible. How do they do it?”

“Only the military can answer that and so far they haven’t.”

David shook his head. “Now he won’t be able to sleep tonight until he figures out how to make one.”



Brenda sighed. “So what’s it doing here?”

“I think I know,” David said. “Cam and I stumbled across some illegal mining on the back of Mt Lidgbird, along with an Eridanian shuttle. I guess they’re here to make an arrest.”

“It must be a pretty big operation to have the military involved. Normally they’re at loggerheads with the civilian police.”

Three more cruisers appeared around the western side of Mt Lidgbird, all sporting bright blue strobe lights.

“It looks like the police have arrived,” Nate said.

“*Hey Nate,*” the thermos bearer said over the radio, “*did you arrange this show for us?*”

“Yeah, I thought you guys might get bored. Just remember to duck if they come close and they probably won’t arrest you.”

“Look!” Cam said, pointing down to the bottom right of Mt Lidgbird. “The miners are taking off.”

A small vessel rose across the face of the mountain, heading in the direction of Mt Gower.

“The police have spotted it,” Brenda said as the four cruisers starting following, their blue lights now flashing faster.

As the miners’ ship came closer, the air around it began to shimmer in a pulsating blue glow.

“What’s happening?” Brenda asked.

“It looks like they’re trying to jump to subspace but the interdicator is stopping them,” Cam said.

A crackling sound came from the vessel, becoming louder as it suddenly veered straight towards them.

“Shit, it’s going to crash into us,” Nate said.

Seconds later, the ship disappeared into the forest canopy back towards the Getup Place, accompanied by a ripping tearing sound.

“Come on,” Nate said, grabbing his backpack. “Someone on that ship might be hurt.”

“Can’t the police handle it?” Nigel asked.

“There’s nowhere on the summit they can land.”

“What if whoever’s on that ship is armed?”

“If they’re well enough to shoot they won’t need our help.”



“Come on,” David said as Nate scampered down the rocks. “I think he’s determined to try out his first aid skills whether we follow or not.”

A few hundred metres along they began to smell something acrid like burning plastic.

“It’s over there!” David shouted, pointing to the right of the track. The ship, the same one they’d seen parked next to the mine on Mt Lidgbird, had crashed through the trees and was sitting slightly askew on the edge of an outcrop of rock. The fuselage was scaped and bent in a few places but was otherwise intact, with the passenger hatch still closed.

Nate dashed ahead, going around behind it and up onto the rocks from where he could see into the cabin. When no gunshots rang out, the others followed.

“There’s someone in there,” he said, “still strapped to their seat by the look of it. We should try to open the hatch.”

David followed him down. “If it’s like the other Eridanian shuttles I’ve flown in, the hatch release will be under a concealed panel on the right.”

“How do you know it’s Eridanian?”

“It’s those markings on the side.”

“Oh, okay. Do you speak Eridanian?”

“Yes.”

“All right, as soon as I open the hatch you can tell them we’re here to help so don’t shoot.”

Nate reached the side of the hatch. “Where’s the concealed panel I’m supposed to open?”

David reached over, pressing three fingers against the fuselage. A few seconds later a small panel popped out and slid across. “Press the button and hold it down for five seconds.”

There was a hiss of escaping air as the hatch released and slid open.

“*Vi är här för att hjälpa till. Skjut inte,*” David yelled.

Everyone crept back, expecting a volley of shots, but when no-one emerged from the hatch or said anything in reply, Nate waved them forward.

David entered the cabin first. Strapped in the seat, with his head to one side and his eyes closed, was an elderly Eridanian man. Blood oozed from a superficial gash on his forehead, but his left arm was bent at an angle suggesting he'd broken a bone or two.

"Are you okay?" he asked, forgetting he was supposed to be speaking Eridanian.

"Hardly," the man said in a hoarse whisper. "Just go away and let me die."

"We can't do that," Nate said, coming in beside David. "I have a first aid kit and training."

The man turned his head while opening his eyes a little. "Why aren't you people wearing any clothes?"

"Sorry," David said. "Long story."

"You, you're David Collins, aren't you, the one who was meant to be Drago's vessel? I can feel that presence even now."

"Yes, but, but how? Drago's dead."

"Of course he is, but you're not and you're still radiating like a goddamned hollow Pasha."

"Sir," Nate said, "we need to get you out of here."

"I'm not a *sir*. No, my body's broken in too many places and if you move me, my death will be a more agonising one."

David and Nate looked at each other.

"There's trouble ahead for you, boy; big trouble. A new Pasha awakens in the home galaxy and, hollow or not, you will be drawn to him. The old ways are returning at last, as the prophecies foretold. A shame that none of my people are left to see it come to pass."

"What do you mean?"

The man tried to laugh but it turned into a wheeze. "Tell your parents, boy, tell them and your great-aunt Elissi that Jameed got the last laugh."

The man's eyes closed again and his head lolled as he lost consciousness.

"What's going on, Davo?" Cam asked from behind Nate, but David was staring into space with a blank expression on his face. "Davo?"

In David's mind, a vision opened of him sitting on a bed in an opulent parlour, in his hand a dart and blowpipe.

*"What you got there, Davo?" Cam asked.*

*"It's Drago's blowpipe and dart that he used to kill Roly. I found them in a hidden compartment at the back of one of the drawers."*

*Cam gulped. "Is, is that the dart that almost killed me?"*

*"Yeah, it would be, wouldn't it?"*

*"Be careful you don't prick yourself on it; there's unlikely to be any antidote here."*

*"I doubt it'd still be toxic after three million years, but I'll be careful."*

*"A lot of the other old stuff seems remarkably well preserved."*

*"Yes, this palace was on the dark side of the planet when it stopped rotating and everything was deep frozen for much of that time. I wonder –"*

*"What?"*

*"Long ago, back in the days before Drago, there'd be a challenge of the Pasha, a ritualised contest of physical and psychic ability in which an existing Pasha and a new challenger would fight to the death. Drago cheated that with this dart and I was just wondering, well, what with all this fuss and threat of war over Caleb being a Pasha, perhaps –" He touched the blowpipe to his lips. "Perhaps this might be a solution."*

*"No, Davo, you can't, you can't seriously be –"*

The vision abruptly ended. David ran his hands through his hair, knowing without having to look that Jameed had died. *What did it mean? Who was Caleb and why did he want to kill him?*

Cam had turned white. "Is, is he d-dead?"

"I think so."

Tears began forming in Cam's eyes. "It's that war plane crash all over again, isn't it? Isn't there anything we can do to save him?"

"I have a heart starter in my first aid kit," Nate said, "but it doesn't work on Eridanians."

"Oh, I see, but –" Cam turned to look at the pilot. "Davo, that blood on his forehead is red, but doesn't Eridanian blood turn green when exposed to the air?"

"You're right, Cam," David said, "but look at his feet; they're definitely Eridanian."

"That Tristan dude who kidnapped Joel had Eridanian feet but wasn't Eridanian. What was it they said he was?"

"A Tivinel, I think, one of the original inhabitants of Huntress."

Cam turned to Nate. "Will your heart starter work on Tivinel?"

Nate shrugged.

"It should," David said, "as we're all descendants of them."

"All right," Nate said, "I'll give it a try. Everyone stand back."

He went to work, following the procedure he'd done numerous times on training dummies. Once all the tabs and sensors were in place, he pressed the *Start* button and stood back.

Seeing that Cam was still distressed, Nate placed an arm around his shoulder. "If he can be revived, the heart starter will do it, but it can't work miracles and nor can we."

"Thanks Nate, it's just, um, there's just too much death on this island."

"No more than anywhere else, really, but I suppose it is a bit in-your-face with all the memorials along the northern walk."

"Do you think, if he doesn't survive, could we put a memorial here?"

"Be positive, Cam, but yes, I'm sure something could be done."

The machine beeped, prompting Nate to turn away and check the readouts. He returned a few moments later, shaking his head.

"It reckons it got his heart pumping but it couldn't produce any significant blood pressure. It's likely he ruptured a major artery in the crash and, well, there's nothing anyone could have done."

Cam covered his face, not wanting to sob out loud as his tears began to flow. David placed an arm around his shoulder, trying to comfort him.

“We did everything we could, Cam, you know that.”

“Yes, but, but it happened so quickly. One minute he was alive and well and the next – it could have just as easily been you, Davo, when you slipped on that rock.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t, Cam, that’s the thing. There are no certainties in life and we need to find the right balance between risk and fulfilment.”

“I, I guess.”

“Hey guys, you’d better come outside,” Nigel said.

Cam wiped his eyes before following the others out of the ship. Directly overhead hovered the interdicator, its underbelly the size of several football fields. A hatch opened, allowing half a dozen uniformed and armed men to descend on winches.

“Come on, we’d best get out of sight,” Brenda said. “They don’t look too friendly.”

After finding a secluded spot amongst the forest and rocks, they watched as the soldiers attached hooks and cables to each corner of the shuttle. Once all was secure, the interdicator hoisted it into its loading bay and winched the team back on board. A loud humming filled the air as it rose into the sky, disappearing moments later in a blue flash and a thunderclap that reverberated back and forth between the two mountains.

Nate’s radio burst into life. “*Are you guys okay up there?*”

“Yes, the Eridanian shuttle crashed near us but the pilot died before we could rescue him, then the interdicator hoisted it on board and disappeared.”

“*Some people have all the fun.*”

“Yep, having fun is what I’m paid for. We should be back down in about twenty minutes, give or take.”

Nate turned to David. “You knew the pilot.”

David ran his hands over his face again. “Yes, he was Jameed, a small-time criminal and former Barradhim operative from

Eridani. My family have, um, encountered him several times over the years.”

“What happened just before he died?” Cam asked. “It looked like you went into a trance.”

“He entered my mind and gave me a vision of something, I think perhaps a prophecy of the future, but, well, I couldn’t make much sense of it and it broke off the moment he died.”

Nate hoisted his backpack. “We’d best start making our way down before anyone else comes poking around here.”

\* \* \*

Parked alongside Nate’s minibus at the Little Island gate was one of the police cruisers. Two policemen emerged and walked over to them as they arrived.

“Which one of you is Nate?” the older of the two asked.

Nate stepped forward. “I am.”

“Were you and your party on the Mt Gower summit earlier today?”

“Yes. This is about the Eridanian ship that crashed, isn’t it?”

“Let me ask the questions, please. We’ve been told the hatch on that ship was opened *from the outside*. Was it you who did that?”

“Yes, the pilot looked to be injured and we wanted to provide first aid.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Huh?”

“Tampering with a crime scene is a serious offence.”

“Tampering? Crime scene? All we were doing was trying to help an injured man.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“Yes, but it didn’t make much sense, just some rambling about a home galaxy, prophecies coming to pass and having the last laugh on someone.”

“Did he mention fractal ore or say anything about what he was doing on the island?”

“No, nothing like that; I think he might have been delirious.”

“I see.” He pulled a card from his pocket. “If you think of anything else, no matter how trivial it seems, please contact me.”

“Yes, of course.”

Nate ushered everyone onto his minibus before the policeman could change his mind.

\* \* \*

Cam took a sip of wine once they’d placed their dinner order, squirming about in his seat before taking another longer sip.

“Something on your mind, Cam?” David asked with a grin.

Cam took another sip. “Yeah, I guess, but, well, I don’t know quite how to say it without you thinking I’m a sook.”

“Sook or not, I’ll still love you just the same. Now out with it before I die of old age.”

“That’s just it, except it’s not the old age bit. That I can handle, growing old and dying is part of life, it’s just all the others.”

“Others?”

“It’s all the young deaths, there are just too many of them here, like that air crew, Kim and now that Tivinel, except, well, he wasn’t young, was he?”

“No Cam, he wasn’t.”

“But he still died when he wasn’t meant to, that’s what I mean. You almost died too.”

“Me?”

“When you slipped on that rock, if I hadn’t been there for you to step on my shoulder —”

“I would have slid down a few metres, scraped off a bit of skin and maybe worst case broken my wrist if I’d landed awkwardly. I don’t die that easily, Cam.”

Cam sighed. “Whatever, then. Look, this is a lovely place for a holiday, don’t get me wrong, I’ve enjoyed all the walking,

swimming, scenery, food and everything, even the bike riding, but there's, well, there's just too much premature death here." He took another sip of wine. "Davo, I want to go home."

"What, to Hazler?"

"No, back to the university on Cornipus."

David shook his head. "Are you sure this isn't about wanting to test that subspace crystal linkage theory you can't stop thinking about?"

Cam sighed again before putting his hands over his face. "Well maybe, I suppose."

"Cam, subspace will still be there when we get back and I doubt anyone's likely to steal your thunder."

Cam looked up at him, snarling while trying not to cry. "I thought you knew me better than that."

David placed a hand on Cam's arm. "I do, really, and I shouldn't have said that; I know that having your thunder stolen isn't something you'd worry about. I get that you're itching to try out your ideas but —"

Cam stared at him when no more words came out. "But what?"

"Sorry, I lost my train of thought. I guess if it was me I'd be itching to get back too, but it's only a few more weeks so you won't die of old age waiting."

"There it is again; there's too much dying here."

"It's only a figure of speech, Cam. Look, I know you had a hard time with Hazler's survival of the fittest paradigm —"

This time Cam did start to cry. "You don't know the half of it, Davo, not even that."

David took hold of both Cam's hands. "Tell me, then. Let it out, whatever it is, and maybe it'll stop haunting you so badly."

"You have to promise not to tell anyone."

"Of course."

Cam pulled his hands free to wipe his eyes. "At the school I went to, well it's much the same in all the wealthy schools there, when the boys reach puberty they're given a test to make sure they'll be able to contribute to the gene pool."



“What sort of test?”

“We have to undress so they can attach electrodes to measure any stimulation and tubes to collect any ejaculation, then naked women come in and, well, do stuff that’s supposed to make something happen.”

“Let me guess, Cam; it didn’t work.”

“No, it didn’t. They even brought in a couple of lithe young men, as those of that persuasion can earn a good living from some of the wealthy elite, but that didn’t work either. I scored zero for the test, or at least I would have, only the supervisor was my science teacher and he fudged my score so I, I—”

David recoiled in shock as he realised where this was heading. It explained everything that had always puzzled him about Cam and, in that instant, he knew why he had to love and nurture him forever, to make him certain, without doubt or fear of regret, that he was unconditionally loved and treasured. Now it was his turn to start crying.

“Oh Cam, how, how could I not have known? I should’ve known, or at least guessed.” He took a deep breath while rubbing his hands over his face. “They kill anyone who fails, don’t they?”

“My science teacher told me I had too much potential to waste, so he paid the courtesans to keep quiet and fudged my score. If he hadn’t done that —”

“He saved your life.”

Cam nodded. “He told me it’d be our little secret, but on Hazler secrets are power and there’s always a price to pay.”

David felt his stomach knot. He wished more than anything for Cam to say that the price had been monetary, donations perhaps from his rich parents to bolster the school’s science labs, but he knew from Cam’s body language and the way he’d said it that it wasn’t. Now he wanted Cam to stop, to not relive the pain by saying any more, but he also knew Cam had to let it all out now the dam had burst. Tears filled his eyes as he sat mute, wishing there was something, anything, he could say or do to ease that pain.

Cam downed the rest of his wine. “We had science last period on Thursdays so he kept me back for some *advanced one-on-one tuition*. At first it was innocent enough and really quite helpful in feeding my appetite for subspace physics. He told me of his student life on Cornipus and the cutting edge research his faculty had been doing, but little by little he also started telling me of his extracurricular pursuits. He made out it was part and parcel of university life and, while being immune to temptations of the flesh would work in my favour, I’d still need coaching to make sure I’d fit in.”

“But —” David started to say, but Cam held up his hands.

“I now know it was lies, although I’m sure a lot of that goes on in some circles, but back then I was frightened and alone so I really had no choice but to let him have his way.” Cam sniffled as tears ran freely down his cheeks. “He, he called me his eunuch, because that’s what I was, what I am, it’s what the tests proved.”

“Oh Cam.” David tried to take hold of his hands but again Cam pulled them away.

“There’s more, Davo, still more I have to tell you now that I’ve come this far. Somehow my mother found out; I don’t know whether one of the courtesans talked or maybe she just guessed or maybe one of my classmates guessed and told her, but somehow she knew. One Thursday afternoon we entered the science room to find the teacher dead with a knife in his chest, and that night Mother slipped a note under my door saying *fixed it for you*.”

David ran his hands over his face again, trying to quell his tears as he saw what was coming. “So now it was her secret, but on Hazler secrets are power —“

“Yes, and there’s always a price to pay, a price I’m still paying.”

## Rogue Planet

David and Cam left the restaurant in uncharacteristic silence. At the junction near the top of the rise, David turned left towards Ned's beach, following the road down to the water's edge where he pulled off his shorts. Thinking they must be going for a starlight swim, Cam did likewise, but instead David flopped onto the sand.

Cam stretched out beside him, following David's gaze skywards. "Is there something I should be looking at?" he eventually asked.

"No, just the stars and the darkness in between. I'm hoping the vastness of the cosmos might clear my mind so I can put into words what I'm feeling right now."

"Oh."

After several more minutes of silence, David finally spoke. "Here we are, Cam, naked under the stars, born on different worlds, raised in different galaxies yet drawn together by, um, was it chance or fate? I think fate, even though the scientist in me doesn't believe in it."

"I'd like to think so too."

"Fate it is, then." David pointed up to one of the Southern Cross pointers. "Remember the other night when we were talking about double stars like Alpha Centauri?"

“Of course; it’s what gave me the idea about the fractal crystal instabilities.”

“Yes, you said that such a system is likely to be chaotic, so a planet could do thousands or even millions of nice circular orbits only to be suddenly flung into wild loop-the-loops and even flip to the other star or be ejected completely from the system.”

“Uh huh, those indeed were my words. You have a good memory, Davo.”

“Hearing you talk tonight made me think of those rogue planets, flung out of their unstable birth orbits to drift in eternal night through cold and empty space. I’ve always thought there was something of a rogue planet in you, Cam, something from your past, something worse than just life in general on Hazler, but, but never did I imagine what it really was that set you adrift.”

Cam drew in a sharp breath that morphed into a snuffle.

“You’re not alone, Cam, I want you to know that more than anything. Hold me, wrap your arms around me so I can feel the warmth of your skin and pass my warmth into you. Let that rogue planet find a safe haven in a new stable orbit. Let us be one, now and forever more, each here for the other no matter what.”

David rolled onto him, wrapping his arms around him. For a moment he feared Cam would push him away and storm off into the night, but instead he reciprocated, wrapping his own arms around him in a warm embrace.

Jameed had called David a *hollow Pasha*, something which hadn’t made much sense at the time, but now he felt Cam’s warmth and love flooding those hollow spaces Drago’s essence had vacated. His heritage as Drago’s vessel had made him just as much a eunuch as Cam, but now, for the first time in his life, he was experiencing something of the sensual fulfilment he presumed other men took for granted. Although nothing stirred in his groins, a wholesome contentment coursed through his veins, extending from the ends of his toes to the tips of his ears. In that timeless moment, his soul melded with Cam’s and he knew beyond doubt that Cam was experiencing the same.

He recalled the first time they'd met at the college's new students' welcome. The university used artificial intelligence to match up roommates, based on school results and a survey accompanying the enrolment procedure, but it had still been an awkward moment. He'd almost cried when he'd learnt he'd be rooming with the son of Hazler's richest tycoons, and Cam had later told him he'd felt the same when discovering his roommate was the son of the Delphinidae High Priestess and a former Supreme Councillor, yet in that awkwardness they'd both found a kindred spirit, a child of innocence escaping his high-profile family to follow a shared passion for science. Where they differed, though, was Cam's fragility, something David hadn't fully understood until now. With a pang of guilt, he cursed himself for all the times he'd bumped against that fragility, not realising how hurtful it must have been, yet in their bond he sensed forgiveness, an unconditional pardon for whatever transgressions he'd made.

A lightest puff of breeze, unseasonably warm and humid, brushed against his skin, as if nature itself was also part of that lovers' embrace. Pip's mantra, *in truth all things are the same*, came to him then and now at last he understood. Space and time were just illusions, quantum artefacts perhaps hiding the splendour of some ultimate reality, but in this moment of bliss, space and time dissolved away, replaced by the universal singularity of an all-embracing love.

David's thoughts stilled as he basked in Cam's touch and warmth, with even the sound of the breaking waves dissolving away. Sleep came unbidden, at first deep and dreamless, but as the night wore on he found himself seated on a golden throne in a hall filled with riches beyond measure. In his hands were the blowpipe and poisoned dart he'd used to kill Roly, for now had come the time to use them again.

*A brown-haired boy of perhaps eight years of age smiled up at him.*

*"I know your secret, Caleb," David said, "but here secrets are power and there's always a price to pay. Are you prepared to pay that price?"*

*The boy nodded.*

*David inserted the dart into the pipe and raised it to his lips. "So be it."*

*As he blew, Cam leapt from the shadows into the dart's path. David drew back his breath but it was too late, with the dart, already on its way, striking Cam on the shoulder.*

*"That was the price," Caleb said as Cam fell limp to the floor, "and it has now been paid."*

David woke with a start, surprised for a moment to be lying on a sandy beach. Cam lay beside him, as pale as a ghost in the bluish pre-dawn light. A cold chill gripped his heart as he looked down on him, convinced he'd died during the night. *It has now been paid.*

There was so much more he'd wanted to say to him but couldn't find the words, could never find the words, but now it was too late for anything. *The price has been paid.* He almost moaned out loud when Cam opened his eyes, breaking the spell. "Huh? Davo? Is it morning already? What's wrong?"

David drew in a sigh of relief as the nightmare's aftershock dissolved away. "Nothing; there's nothing wrong, Cam, nothing at all, except, well, maybe you're right, there's too much death here. It's time we went home."

Cam scratched his head as he sat up. "Thanks, I think." He looked out at the calm water of the bay. "One last swim would be nice, though."

"Of course."

David followed him down to the water's edge. Just as they stepped in, the sun broke over the horizon, bathing them in its golden light.

"I'll call granddad Jase after breakfast to see when he can come and collect us," David said as they floated on their backs. "I'm going to miss this, though."

“Yeah, me too.”

\* \* \*

After driving them to the airport, Nate hung around until Jason’s shuttle had landed.

“I guess this is it, guys,” he said. “It’s been great having you on the island and I hope you can come again soon.”

“Thanks for having us, Nate,” David said. “You’ve been a great host, guide and friend.”

Cam shook his hand. “Thanks, Nate, for being so understanding and helpful.”

“You’re welcome, Cam. I hope your research goes well and, um, I hope you can purge whatever demons are haunting you.”

“Davo’s already helping with that.”

Nate grinned. “Glad to hear it and good luck to you both, always.”

Jason walked over to them. “Are you guys all set?”

David turned to him. “Yep, all set.”

“They didn’t cause you too much grief, did they Nate?”

“Oh heaps, but it’s all part of the job.”

Jason grinned. “I thought as much.”

“Actually it’s been great having them around, especially on the Gower climb. Make sure they come back again soon, and you and Jenny too of course.”

“Of course.”

Nate turned to walk off but Jason stopped him.

“Let me just get a photo of the three of you together.”

“Sure.”

The photo taken, they all shook Nate’s hand again before he sauntered back to his minibus.

“I wasn’t expecting you to be coming back for a few more weeks,” Jason said as they walked across to his shuttle. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s a long story, Granddad, but nothing bad, it’s just Cam wants to do a bit of tinkering at the university before term starts and we’d seen all we wanted to see here.”



Jason turned to look at them. “It doesn’t have anything to do with Jameed’s death, does it?”

David looked surprised. “You know about that already?”

“I have my sources, not the least of which is your great-aunt Elissi.”

“Oh, right.”

“We tried to save him,” Cam said, “but –”

He covered his face, trying to stop the tears.

“I see there’s more to this than Elissi told me,” Jason said, “but it can wait for a better time. I’m sorry I upset you, Cam.”

“No, it’s okay Jase. It was all pretty confronting, that’s all.”

“Oh, you’ll be pleased to know your suggestion about the sodium contamination paid off and the authorities were able to trace the illicit crystals back to their source on Eridani and shut down the operation.”



“I’m glad I was able to help. I think those resonances and the instabilities they cause may have broader implications, which is why I’m keen to get back to Cornipus.”

“I’d have been happy to let you use my lab here but I don’t think we have the right tools. We don’t do much research now, it’s mostly just trouble-shooting for the transport operators.”

“Thanks for the offer anyway.”

Jason opened the hatch and waved them on board the shuttle. After completing all the pre-flight checks, he took to the sky.

Lorina wrapped them both in a hug as they emerged from the terminal in Brisbane. “Look at you Cam, you’re so brown now! I hope you didn’t get sunburnt.”

“I made sure he used plenty of sun block,” David said. “What about me, Mum?”

“I don’t think you can get any darker than you already are, but you’re both looking fit and healthy.”

“Thanks Mum. We got plenty of exercise and the food there is great.”

“Nate was pretty impressed with them,” Jason said as he joined them.

David looked around. “Where’s Dad?”

“He’s tied up in meetings at the school,” Lorina said.

“Oh, right. Have you heard anything from Loraine and Joel? Are they still together?”

“Yes, they’re doing fine. They’ve just crossed the Pyrenees into Spain and should reach the end of their pilgrimage in another month or two. Loraine said the weather’s been glorious, with Joel not even wearing a shirt when crossing the mountains, let alone the heavy cloak everyone kept insisting he’d need.”

“That’s great! Give them my love when you’re next speaking to them.”

“And mine,” Cam said.

“We’re planning a surprise reception for them when they reach Santiago de Compostela. It’s probably a bit much to ask, as you’ll

likely be well into your studies by then, but if you could join us I'm sure they'd appreciate it."

"I'd love to, but with the intergalactic travel taking thirty-six hours each way, it might be difficult."

"That's all right, I'm sure they'll understand."

"Speaking of travel, what's the plan?"

"You'll be staying with us tonight and tomorrow Damon will fly you back to Cornipus."

"We could have just caught a commercial flight."

"Damon and Pip wouldn't hear of it."

"I wish it didn't take so long to fly between galaxies," Cam said. "Is there a fundamental limit preventing faster travel through intergalactic subspace?"

Jason shrugged. "Not that I'm aware of, but it's a bit outside my field. I'm sure if there was a way, someone would have discovered it by now as the freight companies would pay big money for anything that could cut their transit times."

"Oh, I see."

"Have a talk to Peter; he knows a lot more about it than I do. He'll be joining us for dinner."

"Great, I'll do that."

Peter and Mark were waiting in the living room when the others arrived.

"Cam," Peter said, standing, "I was hoping I'd get the chance to speak to you in person before you and David go back to Cornipus."

"I'm honoured to meet you, Doctor Thorpe."

Peter shook his head. "Haven't you learnt yet that there are no formalities here?"

"Sorry, um, Peter."

"That's better. I must thank you for coming up with the clue to those sodium resonances causing the fractal crystal instabilities. That had really had us stumped for quite some time."

“We were lying on the beach looking at the stars and talking about orbital instability in double-star systems when I remembered the equations for fractal subspace linkage are much the same.”

“You have a remarkable ability to see the big picture, Cam. Jase told me you want to get back to Cornipus before term starts to do some experimentation. Please let me know how it turns out; if I was fifty years younger I’d be joining you there.”

“I’ll do that, for sure. Oh, before I forget, Jase said I should ask you about intergalactic subspace and whether there’s any fundamental reason it takes so long to travel between galaxies.”

Peter laughed. “Now I’m really showing my age. At first I thought subspace travel between galaxies would be impossible, or at the very least take hundreds of years, until someone showed me an intergalactic ship they’d flown from Bluehaven to Earth in just a couple of days.”

“I see what you mean; I guess I have a different perspective.”

“You do indeed. But to answer your question, as you know, information can be transferred between our two galaxies in a little under a second, so that’s likely to be the absolute transit time limit. Getting ships to go anywhere near that fast is a whole other matter, though. In intra-galactic subspace, speed is governed by the excitation phasing along the rings and the amount of energy put into them. Jase and Jenny have done a lot of work finding efficiency sweet-spots, which is why all the commercial carriers do the Earth to Eridani run in about thirty minutes, but it’s really quite flexible. For intergalactic travel, though, it’s a whole different coupling mechanism and speed is directly tied to the resonance mode in the crystals.”

“Yes, I saw that in one of our textbooks, but it didn’t say anything about using higher order modes.”

Peter smiled. “That’s your answer, Cam, because only the first-order intergalactic resonance is stable. It’s been proven that everything higher lands outside the stability circle.”

“Proven?”

“Yes; I’ll send you a link to the proof if you want.”

“Thanks.”

“You have something in mind, don’t you?”

“Yes, what we discovered with sodium contamination causing instabilities made me wonder if it could do the opposite with modes that are inherently unstable.”

Peter scratched his chin. “That’s a damn good question, Cam. Please let me know what you find.”

“I will, for sure.”

David chuckled, causing them both to turn to face him. “So that’s what you were working on with the sticks and dirt on Gower.”

“Yes, but the dirt there is only two dimensional so it was rather inconclusive.”

“Oh right. So what about that other thing you were pondering with the way Hamati was exciting the crystals in his lab on ancient Huntress?”

“Yes, all the fractal rings I’ve seen in textbooks and real life have the electrodes plated on the front and back surfaces, but Hamati had been using the inside and outside surfaces instead. I was wondering what difference that would make. I have an idea starting to form about odd and even symmetries but I’m not sure where it’s leading.”

Peter nodded. “Another good question, Cam, but this one I think I can answer. For intra-galactic travel, you want the propulsion to be perpendicular to the rings, which is why the electrodes are on the front and back. Putting them on the inside and outside surfaces would be fine for portals, which I’m guessing is what Hamati was working on back then, but you wouldn’t be able to move through subspace with it configured like that.”

“Thanks Peter,” Cam said, “that makes perfect sense.”

David turned to Peter. “You said that applies to intra-galactic travel. Is it different for travelling between galaxies?”

“Yes, for that the rings don’t provide propulsion, rather it’s a combination of the fractal resonance mode and your initial

direction of travel through real space. In all likelihood it probably wouldn't make any difference exciting the rings that way but I think it's still something that would be worth investigating."

"Oh, right." David snapped his fingers. "I almost forgot, Mum said to tell you dinner's ready."

Peter placed an arm around Cam's shoulder. "Come on, then; Lorina takes a dim view of anyone who's late for her meals."

\* \* \*

After breakfast, Mark drove David and Cam to the Brisbane spaceport where Damon was waiting to fly them back to Cornipus. His phone rang just as he was pulling up.

"Cam, it's Peter," he said, handing it to him.

"Hi Peter, what's up?"

*"I just wanted to let you know that I spoke to Doctor Stokes at your university and he's keen to hear about your ideas. He said he'll have the lab set up for you with whatever you need."*

"That's great, thanks Peter!"

*"No worries, just make sure you let me know what you find, good or bad, okay?"*

"Yep, sure, you'll be the first to know."

*"Thanks Cam. Have a safe trip home and give my regards to Damon."*

"Will do, bye."

## Experiments

Their room at Apogee University on Cornipus didn't look any different from the day they'd left, making their time on Lord Howe Island seem even more dream-like to Cam. On his desk was the half-finished assignment he'd been working on when they'd received that fateful call from the Dean that resulted in them fleeing to Huntress under threat of expulsion. Now the Dean was in prison and they'd been awarded lucrative scholarships as compensation; so much had changed and yet it hadn't.

"I'll make some hot chocolate," David said, but changed his mind when he opened the refrigerator. "Um, or perhaps not, at least not until we've given this a good clean and bought some fresh milk."

"I'll go get the milk," Cam said, grabbing his shopping bag and dashing out the door before he could be volunteered for the cleaning.

It being term break, there were few other people about as Cam made his way to the college shop. After wearing shorts for most of his time on Earth, he suddenly felt self-conscious being out and about nude, until he passed a small group of similarly unclad students and his unease passed. Getting back into the rhythm of student life was going to be harder than he'd thought.

"Cam!" someone called out. He turned to see Doctor Stokes waving to him and suddenly felt self-conscious again.

"Good to see you back on campus," Stokes said. Cam felt a momentary dizziness as his mind switched back to thinking in the Meridian common tongue. "Did you have a nice break away?"

“Yes thanks, it was great. The island we stayed on is such an amazing and peaceful place.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Peter Thorpe told me you have some ideas you want to try out in the lab, so how about you and David take the rest of today to settle in and come around to my office tomorrow morning so I can get you started.”

“Thanks, that’s fine.”

“Excellent; I’m excited to see what insights you two have come up with. Peter was pretty impressed by what you told him.”

Cam blushed. “I don’t know if it’ll do anything useful as I haven’t been able to run any simulations yet, but it’s just a couple of things I haven’t seen done before.”

“There’s no pressure, Cam; you’re both still undergraduates so no-one’s expecting any great breakthroughs from you, but even if nothing eventuates it’d still make a worthwhile paper to write up, particularly after you solved the instability problem that had Peter stumped.”

“Yes, sure.”

“Right, well I’d better let you do your shopping. See you bright and early tomorrow.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Cam continued on into the shop, deciding to grab some fruit and bread as well as the milk.

David looked up from the ultranet terminal when Cam re-entered their room. “Ah good, you got some bread and fruit too. I was about to send you back out for those.”

“Great minds think alike.”

“Of course, and speaking of which, I’ve been trying to put your radial excitation idea into the fractal simulator.”

“What was the result?”

*“An unexpected error has occurred.”*

“Did it say what the error was?”

“Don’t be silly, they never put anything remotely helpful in error messages.”

“Oh.”

“I guess we’ll just have to set it up in the lab and measure it the old-fashioned way.”

“That’s what I was going to do anyway.”

“I know.”

Cam handed the milk to David.

“Can’t you put it in the fridge by yourself?”

“You were going to make some hot chocolate.”

“Oh, yeah, but you make it better than me.”

He handed it back to Cam before returning his attention to the terminal. Cam sighed.

\* \* \*

“You two must have some friends in high places,” Doctor Stokes said as they entered the subspace research laboratory.

David and Cam looked at each other.

“A package arrived yesterday from someone named Willy on Ignus. It contained a small fortune in intergalactic-grade fractal crystals, along with a note wishing you well in your experiments.”

“That’s awesome!” Cam said, grinning. “I wonder how he found out?”

“Word spreads like wildfire in my family,” David said. “I bet Mum’s been onto Pip who would’ve told everyone in this galaxy.”

“So what exactly is it you want to try?” Doctor Stokes asked.

Cam scratched his head. “Back on ancient Huntress, I saw a setup where the electrodes were plated on the inside and outside of a fractal ring instead of on the front and back surfaces.”

“That’s unusual, I agree. What did the simulator say?”

“An unexpected error has occurred,” David said.

“I see, well that’s not totally unexpected given the age of the simulator and the lack of code maintenance it gets. I guess that means you’re going to have to do it the hard way and make some actual measurements.”



Cam nodded. "I'd be doing that regardless of what the simulator said anyway."

"Good for you. The crystals are already sorted by polarisation and the special goo for forming the rings is simmering away, so let's get started. I suggest we make two sets of rings, one plated in the traditional way and the other radially, so you can do a direct comparison."

"Sounds good."

David and Cam followed him into the depths of the laboratory.

Cam connected the analyser to the reference frame with its plating normal to the loop's plane and pressed the start button. David watched over his shoulder with bated breath even though this test was expected to just yield the standard textbook result. A few seconds later that indeed appeared on the screen.

"That's the principal resonance at the centre of the stability circle," Stokes said.

As they watched, more resonance nodes appeared on the display.

Cam sighed. "As you can see, all the higher order resonances are outside the circle, which is why it takes so damned long to fly to Earth."

Stokes laughed. "So that's what this is all about."

"Cam doesn't like sitting around doing nothing," David said, "and the entertainment channels on intergalactic flights leave a lot to be desired."

"I can't say I blame him, even some of the intra-galactic flights here can be pretty tedious. So let's see if your radially-excited ring does any better."

Cam transferred the connections and restarted the analysis.

"Well that's different," David said when no fundamental resonance appeared. "I guess that's why everyone uses normal excitation."

Cam shrugged. "If it had been the same there wouldn't be much point, as inventing a new system with the same flight time

as before isn't that appealing. I really want to see what happens with the higher order resonances."

As if on cue, those resonances started appearing on the display.

"They've moved around a bit," Cam said once the analysis had ended, "but they're still all outside the stability circle."

David pointed at the screen. "That one's close to the circle."

"Yeah, but it's still outside. Being almost stable doesn't count."

Stokes placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "Don't be too disappointed, you'll still get a decent paper out of these results and it might spur someone to update the simulator. Perhaps analysing these results might suggest other things to try, too."

"Yeah, you're right. There's one other thing I wanted to try, if it's not too much trouble, although I doubt it'll make much difference."

"What's that?"

"While we were on Earth, David's grandfather asked us to help with an instability problem they were having, which turned out to be sodium ion contamination in the crystals. Is there any way we can test that?"

Stokes scratched his head. "I think the chemistry department can do ion infusion if I buy them a few beers. Leave it with me."

"Okay, thanks."

"I feel so stupid now," Cam said as they sat eating dinner.

"Stupid? Why?"

"For wanting to leave the island early so I could try out my crazy idea."

"It wasn't crazy, it was something no-one knew the answer to until now. The best experiments are the failures because they're the ones you learn something from."

"Yep, and I've learnt that I was stupid to want to leave the island early."

"Oh Cam, what am I to do with you?"

Before Cam could think of a reply, the waiter returned to top up their wine glasses, reminding him that David was, after all,

paying for this meal in the town's most expensive restaurant instead of dining in the student cafeteria. He raised his glass. "Thanks, Davo, for being so understanding. Cheers!"

"Yes, cheers Cam and remember, tomorrow's always another day."

"With more failures to learn from, no doubt."

"Of course. If subspace physics was easy it would have all been done already. My great-grandfather Billy did his undergraduate thesis on faster-than-light travel but only succeeded in discovering lots of ways for travelling slower than light."

"Really?"

"Yes, he reckons if he ever starts sounding too sure of himself, we're to remind him of that."

"Did they fail him?"

"No, they awarded him the university medal and a prestigious scholarship. He did his doctoral thesis on fractal crystals but that was also something of a failure and it wasn't until he started working with Peter Thorpe that they made the breakthrough that changed the course of Earth's history."

"Gosh, that's amazing!"

"What you discovered today was that radial excitation behaves differently to normal excitation and that's still new knowledge, even if it doesn't have a practical application. It broadens our understanding of nature, which is what we as physicists seek to do, and we should leave it to the engineers to find practical applications for our discoveries."

"Yeah, I guess I never thought of it that way. Thanks Davo."

"That's what I'm here for; now eat up."

\* \* \*

Cam's phone rang.

"Hello; oh hi. That's great, thanks, we'll come around straight away."

“Who was it?” David asked, looking up from the ultranet terminal where he’d spent most of the morning poring over the fractal simulator source code.

“Doctor Stokes, he’s got some sodium-infused rings for us to test. How are you going with the simulator?”

“I think I’ve figured out why it’s giving that error message but I’ll need help from Granddad or Peter to get it to properly support your radial excitation.” He stood, stretching. “Come on, let’s go; I need to get away from that screen before it ruins my back.”

Cam followed him out the door and across campus to the lab.

“Come in, boys,” Stokes said, holding the door open for them. “My friends in chemistry outdid themselves, producing a dozen rings with varying degrees of sodium infusion for you to try.”

“That’s great, thanks!” Cam said. “We should shout them drinks or whatever the custom is here.”

“A mention in whatever publications come out of this is the usual reward, but we’ll worry about that once we see what data you produce.”

“Oh, okay, I just hope that there’s something worth publishing and we’re not chasing unicorns.”

David looked at him. “Unicorns?”

“One of my school teachers would accuse me of chasing unicorns whenever I was daydreaming about physics.”

“That’s good, I must remember that line.”

Cam sighed before following Stokes over to the workbench.

“I’ve set them up in ascending order of infusion,” Stokes said. “Give me a call once you’re done.”

He turned and left the room as Cam connected the analyser to the first ring. After a tense wait, the series of resonance nodes appeared on the screen.

“It’s still outside the stability circle,” Cam said, pointing to the dominant second-order resonance. He was about to disconnect the analyser and move onto the next ring but David stopped him.

“Maybe I’m not remembering very well but I think it looks a bit different to yesterday. Can you bring up that plot?”

Cam opened his data pad, scrolling through it for the relevant image. “Yeah, you’re right, the higher order nodes have juggled around a bit but they’re all still way outside the circle.”

“No, look at that dominant node, it’s moved closer to the centre.”

“Yes, now that you mention it, it has, but that’s not where I need it to move.”

“True, but the fact that it’s moving is cause for hope; it shows that the sodium infusion is having an effect.”

Cam stared at the screen for a few more seconds before nodding to himself and moving the analyser onto the second ring. He turned away from the screen, looking for something else in the room to distract him while waiting for the results to appear.

“It’s moved again,” David said.

Cam turned to look. “Yes, now the other side of centre but still outside the circle. If it keeps following that trajectory it’ll likely go all over the screen except to the place we want it.”

“If I can get the simulator to predict what it’s doing, that in itself will make a worthwhile paper, I’m sure.”

“Yep, and the chemists will get their name in print so it’ll be mission accomplished.”

“You’re starting to sound cynical about academic life, Cam.”

“Cynical? Me?” He moved the analyser onto the next loop, pressed the *Start* button and pointed to a spot on the screen. “I reckon it’ll land right here this time.”

They both stared at the screen waiting for the node to appear right under Cam’s finger but it didn’t, instead taking a new trajectory at right angles to the path it’d been following.

“That’s different,” David said.

“It’s still well outside the circle but at least it’s moving in the right direction now.”

With the next ring connected, Cam again turned away after starting the analyser. When ten seconds had passed but David

hadn't said anything, he turned back to the screen, expecting to see the node having changed trajectory again and moved further from the circle. Instead it was flashing *Reanalysing, please wait*.

A chill ran up Cam's spine while at the same time his bladder felt suddenly full.

When the node finally appeared, it was sitting right in the middle of the stability circle. A new message box appeared on the screen, saying:

*Estimated subspace velocity = 46.3 light-years per second.*

David did a quick mental calculation. "If I'm not mistaken, that's a tad under eighteen hours from here to Earth."

Cam took a deep breath as his knees began to tremble. "So, um, I guess that means we'll be going to Joel's and Loraine's party after all."

## The Galaxy's Richest Man

David and Cam followed as Doctor Stokes led them across campus to see the university's intellectual property lawyer. As he entered the opulent office, Cam again felt self-conscious about his nudity. David looked unperturbed, though, so he decided to just follow his lead.

The lawyer, dressed in his profession's regulation purple robes, waved them into the seats to the side of his desk. "Congratulations on the successful outcome of your experiments. I'm sure there'll be a lot of commercial interest should it pan out."

Cam scratched his head. "What do you mean *should it pan out?*"

"There are further tests that will need to be done. First up, we need to fit your rings to a drone which we'll send to Earth carrying a flight log that someone there will timestamp before sending it back. It will also need a full set of environmental sensors to make sure nothing happens that might be hazardous to a live crew, such as the fuselage becoming porous."

"Is that likely?"

"No, but it's a test that has to be run to satisfy the regulators. We'll also need confirmation of your new mode's stability from the simulator, which I understand Jason Collins and his team on Earth are currently working on."

"Yes," David said, "and from what I've heard they're making good headway, or at least it's no longer an unknown error."

"Once that's all done, we can issue a preliminary notice to the industry and see what reaction we get. Given the benefit the

freight companies will get from halving the transit time between galaxies, I fully expect that will result in quite a financial windfall, which is why I need to speak with you now.”

David grimaced. “I guess that means signing everything over to the university.”

“Not necessarily, unless that’s what you want to do. While the university owns the intellectual property rights to research conducted by members of staff, the same doesn’t apply to students. We’d expect a small amount commensurate with the time Doctor Stokes has devoted to your project but I understand that’s quite minimal. The rest will be yours to use or invest however you see fit.”

“How much are we talking about?” Cam asked.

“There are currently some fifty freight companies in this galaxy engaged in intergalactic trade. Those freighters don’t come cheap and the time spent in transit generates no income, so if your invention does indeed halve that time, it will mean they can double their throughput or halve the number of ships needed for what they’re currently trading. We’re talking some very large sums of money here.”

“So how large?”

The lawyer shrugged. “Enough to make you the richest man in the galaxy, I expect.”

Cam felt the room starting to spin. “I, but, no...”

“Drink this, Cam,” David said, handing him a cup.

Cam opened his eyes. “What happened?”

“You fainted.”

“Oh, yeah, I must have.”

“Sorry I startled you,” the lawyer said, “but if it’s any consolation, you’ll probably still fall well short of topping the richest woman in the galaxy.”

“Who’s that?” David asked.

“I’m guessing that’d be my mother,” Cam said.

“Aphelia Dunn?” the lawyer asked.



Cam nodded. "That's her."

"In that case I'm a little surprised by your reaction to the prospect of receiving a large windfall."

Cam shook his head. "I've seen firsthand what great wealth has done to my family and neighbourhood and I want no part of it, except what I might need to live comfortably and pursue my research with Davo."

The lawyer nodded. "In that case I'd recommend we set up a trust fund to take care of the money and, if I may be so bold to suggest it, perhaps use some of it to fund scholarships if that's where your interests lie."

"I like that idea. The Tivinel of Ignus have only just found their freedom and, well, it was Hamati who inspired me to investigate radial excitation so perhaps the Barungi of Huntress could be included as well."

David grinned. "I think that's a great idea, Cam. We should talk to Willy and Hamati once we know the amount of money that will be available."

"I'd like to bring Pip in on it too since he has the most common sense and patience of anyone I know in this galaxy."

"Good thinking."

The lawyer stood. "Without getting too far ahead of ourselves, I'll go ahead and draw up the trust deeds while we're waiting for the drone tests and simulation results. If your friends are agreeable, we should be able to have everything in place by the time we have to start fielding bids from the transport companies."

Cam gulped. "Is that fielding of bids something you can take care of? I wouldn't have a clue what's a fair bid and what isn't."

"Yes, of course, we can handle all that for you."

"Thanks, you've been a big help and relieved me of a terrible burden."

\* \* \*

Cam gave David a worried look as he entered their room.

“What’s wrong, Cam?”

“That lawyer just called to tell me the drone tests were fine and Jason got the simulator to confirm my measurements, but the regulator now needs someone to do a test flight in an actual intergalactic ship.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem?”

“Test pilots don’t come cheap, especially those with intergalactic ships, and they need the money up front. He suggested I get a loan from my parents but –”

“Oh, I see; but hang on, I think I know someone who might be able to help.”

David dashed over to the ultranet terminal and placed a call to Huntress.

*“Seminary, Damon speaking.”*

“Hi Damon, it’s David Collins here. You’re just the person I need to speak to.”

*“Hi David, how can I help?”*

“Cam’s made a discovery that will halve the travel time between galaxies but they need someone to do a test flight before they’ll approve it. I was wondering if you –”

*“Of course; I’ve heard rumours of your breakthrough and I’d love to help. Just send me what I need and I’ll give it a whirl.”*

“Thanks Damon, you’re a marvel!”

*“Not at all; it’s so exciting to play a part in something like this. You’ve made my day!”*

David turned to Cam. “Problem solved.”

\* \* \*

Pip stood as David and Cam entered the seminary’s common room. “It’s good to see you both again. Congratulations on your breakthrough and thanks so much for your generous offer of scholarships. Help yourselves to the refreshments.”

“Thanks,” Cam said, taking in the wide assortment of drinks and snacks laid out on the tables. “Who else is coming?”

“It’s just us,” Willy said. “Pip’s kitchen staff went a bit overboard with the catering.”

“Hamati told them you be hungry after flight from Cornipus,” Hamati said, grinning.

“Speaking of flights,” Cam said, “thanks for letting Damon test-fly my modified rings. The results of his trips to the neighbouring dwarf galaxies got us over the last hurdles and the regulators have now approved it for general use. The report on our flight to Earth and back will be the icing on the cake.”

Pip laughed. “I wouldn’t have been able to stop him if I’d wanted. Have you had much reaction yet from businesses?”

“The university lawyers are now working through the bids from the transport companies. They expect there to be a substantial upfront payment as well as ongoing royalties, so the funding for your scholarships is looking secure.”

“That’s great!”

With their plates loaded and cups filled, they adjourned to the lounge chairs set around a large coffee table on the terrace.

“The schools on Ignus are most appreciative of your scholarships,” Willy said. “It’ll be a great incentive for their more gifted students whose talents would have been otherwise wasted with the limited opportunities outside of mining and farming on our world.”

“Same here,” Hamati said, “as Barungi population not big enough to support own universities.”

Pip nodded. “The work David’s parents started on Amber and Sontar a couple of decades ago is now paying dividends, with those graduates providing much-needed services on their home worlds.”

David grinned. “I’ll pass that on to them when we get to Earth. Speaking of which, when will we be able to leave? I’d hate to get there in half the time only to arrive an hour late.”

“Damon’s just out getting what he’ll need for your flight and should be ready to go shortly.”

As if on cue, Damon bounded onto the terrace. “Everything’s set so we can leave whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks Damon,” David said. “Mum’s tickled pink that we’re able to be at Joel’s and Loraine’s reception for the end of their pilgrimage.”

“I’m looking forward to it; it’s been a long time since I attended a good party.”

“Give them my best wishes,” Pip said. “I’d have liked to have come too but someone has to stay here and mind the fort.”

Damon led them out and around behind the building to where his cruiser sat waiting on the lawn.

“Stand next to it while I get a photo,” David said to him. “It can go in Cam’s write-up of our flight.”



The photo taken, Damon opened the hatch and ushered them on board. With everyone strapped in, he took to the air and, once in the transfer orbit, activated the jump to intergalactic subspace. The space outside flashed yellow before turning black.

## Reception

Eighteen hours later, the space outside the ship flashed yellow again, revealing Earth's oceans and continents rotating slowly below them.

The radio burst into life. *"Renewal, this is Orbital Control. You're right on time, congratulations!"*

Damon grabbed the microphone. "Thanks, it was a great flight."

*"Are you landing in Brisbane again?"*

"No, we're going to Spain this time, to Santiago de Compostela."

*"Okay, do you want me to book a hire car for you?"*

"Yes thanks, that'd be great!"

*"It's all part of the service, Damon. How many are in your party?"*

"Just two others besides me."

*"Thanks, I'm just putting that in ... done. You should receive the booking confirmation shortly."*

"It's come through now, thanks again."

*"Enjoy your stay. They say the weather's beautiful there at this time of year."*

"We will; cheers."

*"You can start your descent whenever you want. Orbital Control out."*

"Thanks, Renewal out."

"Well that was a friendlier reception than we had last time," Cam said once Damon had closed the call.

“That’s because Joel isn’t with us,” David said before he could stop himself, earning a dirty look from both Cam and Damon. “Sorry.”

Damon returned to the controls to begin their descent.

\* \* \*

After successfully passing through customs, Cam followed Damon and David into the arrivals hall at Santiago de Compostela, only to be confronted by a horde of camera-wielding journalists.

“Did you really fly between galaxies in less than a day?”

“What did it feel like?”

“How much are the transport companies paying you?”

“What brings you to Spain?”

“Which of you is Cam Dunn?”

“Are you really the richest man in your galaxy?”

“What do your parents think of your sudden wealth?”

“What brand of cereal do you eat?”

Before Cam could even think what to say, Damon stepped forward. “I’m Damon Enderling and I’ll try to answer some of your questions, but Apogee University will be issuing a formal press release in the coming days that will cover the financial and business aspects of Cam’s invention and we’re bound not to say anything on that for now. Yes, we flew from Huntress to Earth in just on eighteen hours. It was much like any other subspace flight, with no sensation of movement, except it only took half the time to complete. David is attending a private family function, which is why we’re here in Spain, and it seemed like a good opportunity to make it a test flight of the new subspace drive.”

“Damon, what’s the Black Delphinidae’s involvement in this venture?”

“There’s no formal involvement; we’re just helping out friends like we always do.”

“Is the Black Delphinidae receiving any payment?”

“No.”

“What are Cam’s plans for the future?”

“He and David will be continuing their studies at Apogee University and in a few years will likely pursue postgraduate research in their field of interest.”

Cam nodded.

A voluptuous woman pushed her way forward. “Cam, were you on Lord Howe Island recently? What’s your relationship with David? Are the rumours true?”

Again Damon interceded. “With all due respect, David’s and Cam’s personal life is none of your concern. Any rumours you may have heard are just rumours and are likely untrue.”

“But –”

“I’m sorry but we’ll have to leave it there as we’re due elsewhere. Now if you’ll excuse us.”

Damon strode forward, forcing a passageway between the reporters before turning towards the car rental desks.

“Thanks Damon,” Cam said once they were out of earshot of their pursuers. “You handled that brilliantly.”

“That’s what I’m trained to do. Honestly, that woman had some nerve!”

“I recognised her,” David said. “She’s the editor of a gossip magazine that Loraine used to occasionally throw scorn at.”

“That makes sense,” Cam said. “Oh, there’s one thing you forgot to tell them.”

“Hmm?”

“The brand of cereal I eat.”

David laughed.

\* \* \*

An hour later, they reached the car park in the Plaza del Obradoiro. Before them stood the massive stone cathedral adorned with religious statues and finery.

“The reception’s in the registry office around the corner,” David said, leading them in that direction.

Just outside the entrance was a newspaper stand. Cam stopped, staring at the placard in front of him.



## **Space Heroes Smash Intergalactic Time Barrier**

“Gosh, they didn’t waste any time.”

“There can’t be much else happening on this planet at the moment,” David said. “How did they know we were coming here?”

Damon chuckled. “Orbital Control must have tipped them off.”

“So that’s why he was so friendly and chatty.”

They turned back to the building entrance just as Jason stepped out onto the street. “There you are; we weren’t sure if you’d make it in time. Joel and Loraine are just signing the registry book.”

He led them into the building and down a long corridor to a room at the back that had been decorated with streamers and balloons. Inside were all the Collins family along with Joel’s parents, Peter Thorpe and an elderly woman by his side.



Lorina gave them each a hug. “Congratulations on your breakthrough, Cam. What an awesome achievement for someone so young!”

“It was mostly being in the right place at the right time, anyway Davo deserves just as much credit. It was a team effort.”

“Don’t listen to him, Mum,” David said. “Cam’s the real genius.”

“That’s what Peter and Jason have been saying too. I hear —”

She stopped short as Joel and Loraine entered the room, both looking dusty and weary but full of joy.

“Hip-hip!” Jack Morison shouted.

“Hooray!” responded the rest.

Lorina dashed forward, wrapping her arms around her daughter and son-in-law. “You’re both looking so wonderful and radiant; we’ve been waiting for this moment for months now.”

“We thought it best to leave you in peace while you completed your pilgrimage,” Mark said, walking forward and embracing them both.

“Thanks,” Loraine said. “We really needed the time to ourselves, didn’t we, Joel?”

“Yes indeed, thank you.”

David stepped over to Joel and Loraine once they were free of their parents. “You timed this well to coincide with the mid-semester break. Look at you both, official pilgrims of the Paths of Saint James.”

Loraine kissed her brother on the nose. “Thanks for coming, David; we both appreciate it. We never expected anything like this.”

“It’s the least we could do, and anyway Damon wanted to test-fly Cam’s invention.”

“Huh?”

“Remember that experiment Hamati had set up in his room back, you know, whenever that was?” Cam asked.

Joel scratched his head. “Yeah, he was trying to unravel the mysteries of subspace, wasn’t he?”

“His method of exciting the crystals was something I’d never seen before, so when we returned to the university I arranged with one of the lecturers to do some experiments.”

“What did you find?”

“A higher order resonance in intergalactic grade crystals; one that works, well, better.”

“We did the flight from Huntress to here in just eighteen hours,” David said. “The freight companies are falling over themselves to purchase the rights.”

Cam blushed. “I’ll be using the proceeds to set up educational trust funds on Huntress and Ignus. Hamati and Willy are organising everything.”

Joel embraced them both. “That’s wonderful! I hope everything goes well.”

“We’ll blame you if it doesn’t,” David said, grinning while poking Joel in the ribs.

“I’m sure you will.”

Loraine gave her brother a dirty look before turning away.

“Look,” Damon said, “I’m sure that woman with Peter is Elsa Färjkarlen from Eridani. I’ve wanted to catch up with her for ages.”

Cam turned to David as Damon trotted off. “Wasn’t there an Elsa on ancient Huntress?”

“Yes, she was the ferryman’s daughter and Pedro stayed behind to be with her. Färjkarlen is Eridanian for *ferryman*, you don’t think –”

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