

2123

John Coby

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NOTES

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The novel 2123 is the volume sequel to the novel 2023.2,
which is in turn the volume sequel to the novel 2023.

That is why 2123 begins with chapter Sixty-One.

It is thus recommended

that the reader read the story from the beginning,

from chapter One of the novel 2023,

as the plotlines and characters are highly developed by this stage.

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Chapter Sixty-One

ISS

1

Crewmember, Eichii Tanaka, floated in the cupola of the orbiting International Space Station and observed slack-jawed as the main core of Travers' comet flashed by less than five miles away and slammed into the center of the United States. Overcome with fear for the safety of his family in Tokyo, he witnessed the massive explosion. Australian astronaut, Major Shane Meggs, everybody called him Ginger, who was floating next to Eichii in the cupola, quipped,

'We're about as useful as tits on a bull up here, Itchy.'

Ginger was the larrikin of the station. He had a nickname for everyone. He re-christened Eichii Tanaka, 'Itchy Knackers'.

2

Sixteen seconds after the main core of the comet buried itself forty miles into the planet, a quarter-mile-wide piece of rock, travelling at 12.5 miles per second, smashed the International Space Station into eternal oblivion.

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Chapter Sixty-Two

WORMWOOD

1

Noah stood upon the upper hull of his spacecraft, which hovered just above the top of a thousand-foot-high butte that was located a few miles to the east of the town of Green River, Wyoming. He scanned the million-strong crowd sprawled out one thousand feet beneath him. Taking a deep breath, he wrapped his left hand around the master time chip, which hung around his neck by a thin piece of leather, then looked straight up. His eyes locked onto the lethal menace hanging in the sky directly above him like a giant celestial chandelier. His people named it Wormwood some six thousand years before. He could clearly make out the 25-mile-wide core and many of the accompanying satellite projectiles that were hurtling directly towards him at 12.5 miles per second. He knew that in 60 seconds time, Wormwood would bury itself forty miles into the Earth's crust right where he was standing. He raised his right arm and pointed directly at the plummeting projectile.

2

By design, the master time chip was to be activated telepathically. When activated, it in turn activated 144,000 other time chips that were implanted in 144,000 carefully selected human beings located all over the Earth. Also activated were over six million time chips that were embedded in every kind of creature that walked, crawled, flew or swam above or below the surface of the planet. When activated, these time chips were programmed to time shift 36,525 rotations of Earth around its axis. Essentially, the time chip disappeared from the present and reappeared in the same location 100 years in the future. In accordance with the law of connectedness, the time chip pulled whatever was physically connected to it through time with it.

3

Five seconds before Wormwood entered the atmosphere, and ten seconds before it slammed into Green River, Noah activated the master time chip.

In that moment, he saw the comet disappear from the sky and the sky change from a clear cerulean blue to a smoggy yellowy brown. His next breath

came with an acrid smell of sulphur. He looked down and observed an endless smouldering lava pit. Where before his ship hovered a mere foot above a flat-topped butte, it now, all of a sudden, hovered thousands of feet above what he saw as the pit of hell for as far as the eye could see. There were smoking pools of glowing-red molten lava interspersed by miles and miles of solidified black igneous rock with patterns in it that made it look like toffy. He could hear hissing and cracking, and the occasional explosion, and he could feel the radiant heat rising from the hellish cauldron below. Finally, it was the sulphuric stench that drove him back into his ship, but before he did so, he took a moment, looked up into the sky, placed his hands together and gave thanks to the One for allowing him to successfully be time shifted one hundred years into the future. He also prayed for all the humans and animals that were time chipped and for their successful time shift. Done praying and comfortably settled inside the silver disc, he set off for his first scheduled stop, a mountaintop in the Californian Sierra Nevada Range that went by the name of Pike's Peak.

4

Although he knew roughly what to expect to see one hundred years after the huge impact of the 25-mile-wide comet slamming into the Earth at 12.5 miles per second, he also knew that there was much that was impossible to predict. He knew that the final crater should be over 220 miles across and that it should have cooled down enough to allow the rest of the Earth to revert back to a semblance of pristine wilderness. He also knew that the impact shuddered the whole planet and that the stability of things such as geological faults were impossible to assess. He knew that earthquakes of the magnitude 10+, on the Richter scale, rampaged around the planet, shaking all the infrastructure of human civilization into rubble and dust. He knew that tsunamis the size of mountains swept everything out of existence clear across whole continents. However, no one could predict the stability of fault lines. There was no way of knowing which ones would snap and which ones would hold. So, this initial venture into the unknown future was still very much a journey of discovery for him, and a profound education.

He began to rise vertically from what was previously ground level. He sat in his seat and observed the scene outside the ship on the spherical holographic display, which completely surrounded him. He rose slowly, about one thousand

feet per minute, and took everything in. Pure hell boiled and hissed for as far as the eye could see. He levelled off at about five thousand feet and headed in the direction of a green cross, which glowed on his display and which marked out the position of Pike's Peak, California. He flew over the boundary of the giant crater. It extended right out to where Salt Lake City used to be. He observed that the Great Salt Lake was completely dried up and the huge, brilliant-white expanse of the Great Salt Lake Desert was barely discernible due to it having been peppered by a layer of ejecta. Everything was black and charred for at least 500 miles radius from ground zero. He looked west and saw mostly blackness and charring right up to the Sierra Nevada Range where he could see that the tops of the peaks were covered by snow. Embedded amongst the peaks was the green cross towards which he was flying.

5

He flew in from the east, about a thousand feet above the top of Pike's Peak. A broad smile appeared on his face when he saw a group of survivors standing right where his friend, Thebe, instructed them to be exactly 109 years before, to the day. As he approached close enough, he counted them. To his disbelief, there were seventeen of them. He shook his head with delight at how successful this time shift turned out to be. Their time shifter saved another sixteen of them.

'This could set a record,' he thought to himself.

As it was the afternoon with the sun being well to the west of the Peak, he decided to hover his ship about 50 feet to the east of them. That way they could look at him without having to look into the sun. He still wore his levitation suit from his previous assignment. He opened a panel on the upper surface of his ship and floated out through it. He then floated down toward them. They all stared at him with their mouths agape. He floated in and landed amongst them. He pulled off his goggles and balaclava, allowing them to hang behind his neck, smiled a handsome smile and asked in a calm, kind voice,

'Is everyone OK?'

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Chapter Sixty-Three

PIKE'S PEAK

1

It was the morning of *Saturday 23rd September 2023*. Clint Rodgers, aka Cowboy, who was the fittest, led the group of seventeen up the steep southern slope of Pike's Peak, which was located in the Sierra Nevada mountain range due east of San Francisco. Following him were his girlfriend, the actress Lauren Cole, Tommy Jones, the alien contactee and time shifter, Jonesy's wife, Lori, their four girls, Carla, Clara, Catherine and Connie, Snake and his girlfriend, Trixie, Dirk DeRongo and his girlfriend, Inga, Ludwig and his wife, Ivana, Ace and his Italian girlfriend, Johanna, and trailing at the rear came Melvin, the cinematographer. They each carried a heavy backpack, which was full of survival gear, and wore tough, all-weather, mountain clothes.

Nine years today, be bound to your family on Pike's Peak, east of San Francisco. That was what the alien lady told Jonesy as she flew next to him as he flew circles above her space ship in his trike. That was nine years before, to the day. He managed to video her on his iPhone. A few days later, he showed the footage to Snake, his old school chum, who saw plenty of potential in it and hired Ludwig, a director, to organise a crew to film a documentary dealing with the event. They produced a total of eight documentaries in the following nine years. The documentaries were huge hits all over the world making Snake, Jonesy and the rest of the crew wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. As the project progressed from year to year, the individuals in the crew grew closer, becoming less of a crew and more of a family. And so it eventuated that they all decided that they would follow the alien lady's instructions and be on top of Pike's Peak on the 23rd of September 2023, all together, all bound to each other with rope because one of the group, Ludwig, had a theory that Jonesy would be time shifted into the future and that he would pull anyone, or anything, that was bound to him, through time with him.

They huddled in a group on top of Pike's Peak as Jonesy tied them together via their wrists. Some of them glanced at the empty truck parked way down the

slope on the trail. It had been their transport from their house in Pinecrest Lake, which was located five or so miles down the road.

'What time is it?' asked Trixie.

Snake looked at his watch and replied,

'Quarter past one, cupcakes, west coast time. Less than ten minutes to go.'

'I'm frightened, daddy,' said Connie, the youngest of Jonesy's girls.

'There's nothin to be frightened about, sweetheart, cause we got it all worked out.' He gathered his family into a tight bundle and hugged them all. 'Besides, your daddy is here now an he'd never let anythin bad happen to you, ever.'

They all grouped into a tight bundle, hugged each other and gazed skyward.

'There it is,' exclaimed DeRongo, 'there's the comet, right on time and right on target.'

They all stopped breathing as they observed the huge menace appear in the sky directly above and slightly to the east of them. Then, in the blink of an eye, like an edit in one of their documentaries, the comet disappeared and they suddenly found themselves buried waist-deep in pristine white snow.

'Holy Toledo,' exclaimed Snake, 'I don't remember it snowin.'

Ludwig burst out laughing in a state of total euphoria,

'It's happened!'

Everyone started laughing, cheering, high fiving and hugging each other.

'There you go girls,' said Jonesy in a reassuring voice, 'Told'ja we'd be OK.'

They dug themselves out of the snow and untied the rope that connected them. When everyone was untied and free of the snow, Snake came up to Jonesy, faced him, placed his hands on his shoulders, looked deeply into his eyes and declared,

'This comes from each an every one of us, Jonesy, thank you compadre, we all owe you our lives and are indebted to you for as long as we live.'

Jonesy, feeling somewhat embarrassed, replied,

'Jesus, Snake, you ain't usually one for so much bullshittin.'

Everyone laughed. Cowboy pointed down the hill and observed,

'Look, the truck is gone!'

Melvin pointed north-east. 'Look at the black cloud in the distance.'

Everyone looked in that direction.

'It looks like an active volcano,' said Ludwig. 'It appears to be hundreds of miles away.'

'It might be Yellowstone,' suggested Jonesy.

'Look at the way it rises and then bends due east in the jet stream. That would be at least 25,000 feet high. The smoke stack looks pretty wispy, though. I reckon that that volcano has done its worst and is in the process of shutting down.'

'Look over there,' said Trixie in a puzzled voice. She pointed due east. 'I thought I saw somethin flash in the sky.'

'Where, cupcakes?' responded Snake.

'There, right there,' she pointed again, 'there, in the sky.'

'Oh yeah,' exclaimed DeRongo, 'I see it! There it is! I think it's headed this way!'

'It's your aliens, Jonesy,' exclaimed Ludwig.

They all huddled together in a tight group, all completely mesmerised by the approaching flying object. As it approached closer, Jonesy declared,

'It's the same silver disk that has been visitin Green River over the years.'

The exquisite craft slowed and came to a levitating stop about 50 feet to the east of them. Its surface glinted in the afternoon sun as a panel opened on its upper hull. A human, dressed in a body-hugging electronic suit that completely covered him from head to toe, floated out of the opening in the space ship, flew down and landed amongst them. The alien pulled a pair of goggles off his eyes and a balaclava off his head and let them hang behind his neck. All the females skipped a heartbeat as he revealed his handsome face. He was tall, about 6'2", and broad across the shoulders. His skin was either dark or deeply tanned and he wore his sun-bleached, brown hair shoulder length. Everyone was immediately struck by his self-assured demeanour. He smiled and enquired in a most manly tone, 'Is everyone OK?'

That set them all off. Seventeen voices fired off with every kind of question imaginable. It was impossible to make anyone out. He smiled and waited for them to calm down. He fully understood their excitement. Finally, unable to control

himself anymore, he broke into a hearty belly laugh. Gradually, one by one, they all stopped jabbering. He looked warmly at all their faces and introduced himself.

'Hello, my name is Noah and I come from a planet in the Andromeda Galaxy called Rama. Rama is almost identical to Earth. It is my sincere pleasure to meet you all.'

That set them all off again. Noah smiled and patiently waited for the kerfuffle to subside. Eventually Ludwig, who everyone considered to be the most eloquent in the group, asked the first question.

'Have we been time shifted?'

'Affirmative. It is the 23rd of September 2123.'

That set them all babbling again. Noah couldn't help but laugh. After they all settled down again, Ludwig asked the next question.

'What happened to all the people?'

Noah looked at them all, shrugged his shoulders and replied,

'I only just got here myself. I haven't really had a chance to look around, except for the hellhole that remained after the comet hit. There was nothing alive in there. I suspect that everyone is gone, but I don't know.'

'Gone? You mean *dead*?' Jonesy asked.

'Pretty much, but life is full of surprises. I guess that we won't know for sure until after we've done some exploring.'

Lori, Jonesy's wife, asked Noah,

'Why was my husband chosen to be saved? Why not someone else?'

Noah looked surprised by the question. He thought for a moment, then replied with a question.

'How would you describe your husband in a couple of words?'

Lori thought about it and said, 'Kind and loving, and a little crazy.'

'There you go,' said Noah, 'and I believe that he has had some experience with LSD. That made him a most excellent candidate to interact with fully telepathic people such as the Rama.'

Jonesy grinned a cheeky grin,

'See, pumpkin, it weren't all bad like you thought.'

She looked at him like she was looking at a mischievous child. Noah observed, 'I see that you are all very well prepared.'

'Snake's the organiser,' said Cowboy.

'Snake, what a colourful name. Which one of you is Snake?' Noah held out his hand. Snake stepped forward and shook it.

'I'm Snake and it's nice to actually meet you after all these years.'

'Ditto to that, Snake. How are you set for supplies?'

'We've got about two weeks' worth on our backs and there might be a container buried in the ground down the mountain in Pinecrest Lake, but I don't know if we'll be able to find it after all these years. We could go for a lot longer if we could find the container.'

'I see,' said Noah in a thoughtful voice. He paused, then continued, 'Firstly I need to fly to Australia to hook up with other survivors, then I will return and join you for a short time. Give me three days. You may witness the occasional ship traversing the sky.' He looked at their weapons. 'I see that you are well armed. Er, it is my guess that there are, at best, around about a hundred-odd thousand Earth humans left on the planet at this time. That number will more than likely dwindle in the short term for a variety of reasons. Many of those reasons could not have been foreseen by anyone. All in all, there is certainly plenty of room for everyone and there should never be a need for any of you to compete with anyone for anything.'

'A hundred-odd thousand?' exclaimed Ludwig. 'There used to be eight billion.'

Noah shook his head and sighed,

'Yes, that was one nasty comet. So, you will all be all right for a few days?'

'I think so, Noah,' replied Snake.

'We'd better get down off this mountain before we start feeling the cold,' suggested DeRongo.

'Yes,' Noah agreed, 'you should try to get yourselves below the snowline before dark. I must go now, but I will find you in three days or maybe three and a half. Until then ...'

They watched him pull his balaclava and goggles over his head and launch into the sky like Superman. He re-entered his ship, the panel closed and the ship literally disappeared from view.

'That was incredible,' said DeRongo.

'We don't wanna spend a night in the snow if we can help it,' said Cowboy.

'You never said nothin about snow, Snake,' said Trixie.

'Well, I ain't no Nostradumbass, cupcakes. How was I supposed to know there was gonna be snow in the future?'

They partially ploughed through, partially slid down, the snowy mountainside. The heavy packs made the going more difficult.

'Everything looks different,' observed DeRongo. 'It's like were coming down a completely different mountain.'

'We seem to be higher, but who could be sure?' added Ludwig.

They slid down the slope dodging huge boulders along the way.

'There are no trees. Where are the trees?' Jonesy asked.

Melvin took a look down the slope through his binoculars. He was looking for the treeline.

'I can't make it out very clear, Jonesy, but there definitely ain't no old trees left standin down there. We still got a couple of thousand feet to go to get below the snowline.'

'I can't get over how everything looks different,' Jonesy replied.

The sky was a clear, deep blue. There was not a breath of wind. It was approaching 3.00pm and the afternoon sun warmed the western side of the Sierra Nevada Range enough to generate a long cumulus cloudstreet stretching southward for as far as the eye could see.

They could feel the air getting warmer as they descended down the mountain. They made their first camp right on the edge of the snowline. They barely had enough time to set up their tents before it became too dark to see. They cooked their freeze-dried meals on top of their small butane stoves and used LED lights for vision.

'At least we don't have to worry about water,' said Ludwig.

'How far do you reckon it is to Pinecrest, Jonesy?'

'About three miles as the crow flies, I reckon, Snake.'

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Chapter Sixty-Four

MECCA

1

The sleek, timber sloop glided lazily across the calm ocean. There was barely enough strength in the light westerly zephyr to fill her blood-red sails. It was a couple of hours after sunrise on *Sunday 24th September 2023, East Australian time*. To an albatross soaring above, Mecca looked like she was floating on an ocean of liquid fire.

Lloyd manned the tiller while Sophia and Alex sat next to him. Alex was playing with his iPod trying to select some appropriate music for the morning. Everyone on board wore their safety harnesses, which were clipped to the guardrail.

'Is everyone ready for a coffee?' asked Eva from within the cabin.

'Yes please,' they all replied in unison.

'If I must be honest, Lloyd,' said Sophia in a whiny voice, 'I am beginning to get quite bored sitting out here going around in silly circles.'

'How could we forget your magazines?' said Alex.

'One more day, maybe two, then we'll sail back home,' said Lloyd reassuringly.

'It's starting to look like a huge anticlimax, Lloyd, isn't it?' said Eva.

'I welcome the anticlimax, darling.'

The digital clock next to the hatch flipped from 7.22am to 7.23am. Eva was bringing the coffees above decks on a tray when suddenly, faster than suddenly, in a heartbeat, the tray and the four mugs of coffee disappeared into thin air and the ocean changed from a glassy lake into a wild tempest. The sky changed from a clear blue to a dark, squally grey. The wind changed from a balmy five knot westerly to a fifty-knot, freezing-cold, south-easterly gale. In an instant they were in the midst of lashing rain and sea spray, and huge, white-capping swells. The icy gale overpowered the sails and slammed Mecca into a powerful knockdown. She heeled near to 90 degrees until the mast touched the ocean surface. Eva was violently pitched overboard. The other three managed to hang onto the guardrail. The boat naturally headed into the wind and the weight of the keel righted her.

Covered in spray and deafened by the roar of the wind, Lloyd screamed out his instructions.

‘Grab the tiller, Alex, and keep her pointed into the wind.’

Alex grabbed the tiller with both hands as Lloyd scrambled to the port side of the cockpit. He hung his body over the rail and grabbed Eva’s lifeline. He could see that she was not hurt. He began hauling her in when a huge wave hit him and washed him to the back of the cockpit. He ended up on top of Alex and Sophia tangled up amongst some ropes. He maintained his hold of Eva’s lifeline however. He pulled himself up to his feet and began hauling on her lifeline again. Eva was fit and an excellent swimmer, but it was obvious to Lloyd that she was having difficulty in the turbulent water. After a few strong pulls on the line, he finally managed to pull her to the side of the boat. She grabbed the gunnel and held on for dear life. Lloyd tried to pull her up further, but didn’t have enough strength. He called out to Alex,

‘Give Sophia the tiller and come give me a hand with Eva!’

Alex placed Sophia’s hands on the tiller and said,

‘Just keep it straight into the wind, darling.’

Sophia looked at him with a look of total horror in her eyes and grabbed the tiller, something she had never done before in her life.

Alex clambered up to Lloyd. Together they leaned over the rail, grabbed the back of Eva’s safety harness and with a big heave, pulled her out of the water.

As soon as Eva was back in the boat, she quickly recovered and assessed the situation. She had plenty of rough-weather experience with Lloyd and she could see that Sophia was losing control of the tiller and was becoming visibly panicked. She yelled out,

‘You boys pull down the sails and I’ll take over the helm and look after Sophia.’

Mecca pitched and rolled violently in the turbulent water making it extremely difficult and dangerous for the boys to drop and tie off the mainsail. After that job was complete, they furled the headsail leaving only a small portion of it exposed to act as a storm jib.

Lloyd and Alex scrambled back into the cockpit. Lloyd took the tiller and turned Mecca downwind. She accelerated down the next giant swell. The

following swell white-capped at the top, picked up the dinghy, which was being towed behind Mecca and was full of supplies, and smashed it into the stern of the boat.

'We'll have to let the dinghy go,' yelled Lloyd. 'Untie it, Alex.'

Alex did as he was told and set the dinghy, with all of its extra survival supplies, adrift. Lloyd knew that to attempt to keep towing the dinghy would have almost certainly assured that it would have smashed itself to pieces against Mecca's stern and more likely than not caused damage to the boat as well.

As they silently watched the dinghy surf past them down the following swell, Lloyd leaned against the tiller in a vain attempt to try to stop Mecca from broaching. He asked Eva, who was hanging on for dear life next to him,

'Eva, darling, what do you think about throwing out the sea anchor?'

Eva crawled through the hatch and retrieved the sea anchor from below decks. She tied it off to a cleat in the stern and slid it under the pushpit into the water. The rope holding the sea anchor twanged into tension and everyone noticed how the boat instantly slowed and became much more directionally stable. Eva returned to her spot in the cockpit. Everyone was drenched and freezing-cold because they were still wearing their lightweight, warm-weather clothing. Lloyd barked out more instructions.

'OK, we all have to change into our waterproofs. Eva, you go first and take Sophia with you. Get some dry clothes on, put on your storm gear, put your harnesses back on and then come back out here.'

The girls did as they were told.

'You're next, Alex.'

Alex went below and changed into appropriate apparel. When he returned, Lloyd told him to,

'Keep her headed directly downwind, Alex, while I get changed.'

When he returned, he grabbed the tiller, looked at the compass and assessed,

'As far as I can make it, we were 20 miles due east of Sydney Heads before this storm started. This gale is coming straight out of the south-east so there is no way that we can make it back to Sydney Harbour. Our best bet is The Hawkesbury.'

We'll set the heading to north-west as best we can and try to get in around Barrenjoey into some sheltered water.'

Every giant swell picked up Mecca's stern and accelerated her down its face like a surfboat. The sea anchor managed to keep her under ten knots and Lloyd's years of experience kept the bow pointed downwind. At every opportunity he attempted to sail in as westerly a direction as conditions would allow. He realised that he needed to get sight of land as soon as possible so that he could find Barrenjoey Headland and the entrance to the sheltered waters of Pittwater and The Hawkesbury River.

The driving rain and sea spray created a grey fog, reducing visibility to less than one mile, and then only when they were at the tops of the swells. When they were down in the troughs, they could see nothing.

Lloyd constantly monitored his direction, speed and time, attempting to dead reckon their position. He did this because his GPS was out. He wasn't sure whether it was his receiver that was down or whether it was the whole system. Either way, he now had to rely on his own instincts and an abundance of local knowledge. He calculated that Barrenjoey would have been about twenty-five miles to the north-west of them when the weather changed. He knew that it was imperative that they got into Pittwater because if they got blown past it, they would have to sail all the way up the coast to Port Stephens for safe shelter. Lloyd decided that that was too far and too risky because he harbored a concern that the storm was still on the build. So, he continued to head Mecca as close to due west as he could.

After about two hours of rough sailing, Alex pointed across the bow and screamed out,

'Look, Lloyd, there's a light up ahead!' They focussed onto a faint light that was intermittently emerging out of the murk. 'What is that? Is that land?'

'I don't think it can be land yet, Alex. We should still be about five miles out. That light is only about a mile ahead. It must be a vessel of some kind.'

'Make sure we don't hit it, sweetheart,' cautioned Eva.

They headed directly for the light. On a normally clear day they would have already had plain sight of the coastline. All they could see in the raging storm,

however, was a wall of mist and pelting spray, and that was only when they were on top of a wave.

Lloyd was desperate to not sail past Barrenjoey Headland. All their immediate fortunes depended on them finding and sailing into the shelter of Pittwater. He continued to head as far to the west as conditions would allow. Occasionally a huge wave slammed into the port side of the sloop causing Lloyd to have to steer more downwind. He knew that each time he did that, it increased their chances of being blown past the entrance of Pittwater.

'That light's not getting any closer, Lloyd.'

'It is strange, isn't it? It's as if it's heading in the same direction as we are.'

'They are probably trying to get into Pittwater just like us.'

'That's it, Alex. I bet that's it. We should see the coast pretty soon and then we'll be able to fix our position.'

Within minutes, the east coast of Australia materialised out of the haze.

'There it is,' exclaimed Lloyd, 'and there is Barrenjoey right on cue. We are just going to sneak it in.'

As the four of them huddled in the cockpit, freezing cold and drenched by the pelting spray, they all witnessed an impossible sight. The light they had been following for the last two hours, which they thought was another vessel, suddenly took off vertically and disappeared into the clouds.

'Holy cow, Lloyd, did you see that?'

2

Everything calmed as they sailed behind the lee of Barrenjoey Headland into Pittwater. The sky was still dark grey and it was still pelting rain, but at least the 28-foot timber sloop, Mecca, was out of the gale and ferocious sea. Lloyd pulled in the sea anchor, fully furled the jib and fired up the diesel. The first thing that caught everyone's attention was the condition of the lighthouse on top of Barrenjoey Head.

'Jesus, Lloyd, it looks like somebody dropped a bomb on it, and it's all overgrown with vegetation.'

The top two thirds of the lighthouse were missing and only the tops of the ruins of the lower third could be seen poking out of dense undergrowth. Lloyd grabbed his binoculars and had a closer look.

'This is really strange. The walls of that thing must have been a foot thick. I wonder what happened to it? And how could all that growth happen in just a few days?'

'I'm still trying to understand the light,' said Sophia.

'Yes, that's two weird things,' said Alex.

'Actually, you are forgetting the instant storm,' added Eva. 'That was weirder than weird.'

'So that's three weird things,' said Alex.

'Three and counting,' added Lloyd. 'You know, if I must be honest, I believe that I'm beginning to detect a touch of euphoria.' Everyone looked at Lloyd, surprised. 'What? Don't you think it's euphoric finding shelter out of a bastard storm like that?'

'Hello, hello,' said Alex in jest, 'Lloyd is losing it. Did we bring a straitjacket?'

That lightened up the mood somewhat.

'Why don't we go and have lunch at The Newport Arms?' suggested Sophia. 'I'm absolutely famished.'

'I wouldn't mind a beer,' said Alex.

'I love Sunday afternoons at the Arms,' added Lloyd.

'Is anyone paying any attention?' asked Eva. Everyone looked at her. 'Look at the far shore ... there are no houses. Where have all the houses gone?'

Eva took the binoculars from Lloyd and looked across the bay past Lion Island towards Umina Beach. She looked at Pearl Beach and Patonga and observed,

'There is no sign of civilisation anywhere.'

'Some of it is National Park,' said Lloyd, 'but I take your point. Where have all the houses gone? ... And the jetties and wharves ... and boats? ... There is nothing there.'

As they rounded the western tip of Barrenjoey they became exposed to the gale again, however the water was calm because they were in the lee of the low sand spit that connected Barrenjoey to the mainland.

'Let's motor around and see if the pub is there,' suggested Lloyd.

'Where is the Boat House and the golf course? Everything is overgrown and wild,' exclaimed Eva. The look on her face expressed a mixture of shock and surprise. 'What is happening, Lloydie?'

As they motored further south, deeper into Pittwater, they again came into water more sheltered from the wind.

'Look over at Coaster's Retreat,' Lloyd pointed across the bay, 'it's usually packed with moored boats. There's not one boat there. There's not one boat anywhere.'

'I'm starting to get frightened, Alex,' said Sophia.

'You can't get frightened, darling, because you're supposed to stop me from getting frightened.'

Mecca motored slowly up Pittwater towards Church Point. They could feel the expressionless numbness in their faces as they struggled to come to terms with the reality being served up to them. The tricky part was connecting the dots between that day and the day before. Their brains struggled with the problem and forgot about their facial expressions. Sophia snapped out of it first.

'Close your mouth, Alex.'

'The Arms is gone,' observed Lloyd.

'Everything is gone, darling, except us.'

They motored around Scotland Island, past Church Point, and began to head back out of the bay towards Lion Island.

'It looks like before the white man came,' observed Sophia.

'Yes,' Eva agreed, 'like we have been transported hundreds of years into the past.'

'Maybe we'll bump into Captain Cook tomorrow,' said Alex in a funny voice.

'Right now, nothing would surprise me,' Lloyd replied. He looked around the bay, took note of the conditions and suggested, 'The wind is behind us now, so why don't we save some diesel.'

He shut down the motor and asked Alex to partially unfurl the headsail. There was always a small surge of inner pleasure when the noise of the motor ceased and the silence of the sailing began. They all felt it and delighted in it.

'We must start thinking about where we'll spend the night.'

'Let's spend it in Bobbin Head, sweetheart,' suggested Eva.

'Good idea, let's go there.'

3

Everything that could be connected with the existence of man was gone from Bobbin Head. They anchored where the marina used to be, safely sheltered out of the wind. As night descended, they huddled together in the cockpit sipping hot minestrone soup and feeling frightened by the complete darkness and silence that enveloped them.

'I never thought I'd miss the streetlights so much,' Eva sighed.

'I miss the radio. All the radio stations are dead,' said Sophia.

'At least we still have the iPod,' said Alex.

The only light burning was a small candle they placed near the hatch. Its tiny flickering flame lit their faces just enough to be seen. The conversation stalled as they enjoyed their soups with some bread. Eventually Sophia broke the silence by suggesting,

'I doubt that we'll ever run into Captain Cook.'

'Really? Why is that, my precious?'

'Because, Alex, I doubt that there was a lighthouse on top of Barrenjoey two hundred years ago.'

Lloyd laughed,

'You never fail to outsmart us all, Sophia. Sophia is right, of course, we must be sometime in the future. Enough time must have elapsed to wreck the lighthouse and then have it overgrown with vegetation. That lighthouse is our only link to our time. Without it we could be anywhere.'

'You mean anytime, Lloyd.'

'Of course, that is what I mean. So, it's a good bet that, all of a sudden, we're in the future, but the big question is, how far in the future?'

'I doubt that it matters,' said Sophia. 'The time in history seems irrelevant to me. What seems most relevant is the state of everything. Whether it is ten years or a thousand years in the future doesn't matter ... it seems to me.' She looked at the other three slightly embarrassed about being so forthcoming with her opinion.

'I think Sophia is right,' affirmed Lloyd. 'We seem to have found ourselves in a time where time is not relevant. It's just whenever with the only link to 2023 being that lighthouse in ruins.'

'I wonder if the pyramids are still there?' asked Alex.

'More than likely,' responded Eva. 'It would take a lot to get rid of them.'

'You know, I just realised something.' Everyone looked at Lloyd. 'We haven't seen any people ... anywhere.'

'Do you think they're all dead?'

'Well, Alex, I don't know, but something major has happened. Maybe it was a tidal wave. It must have been over 500 feet high to take out the lighthouse like that.'

'I'm becoming worried about Leon and Russel, and their families.'

'I am as well, darling, although Warren is a very long way from the ocean and on the other side of the Blue Mountains.'

Lloyd and Eva were talking about their twin sons and their families who lived on the family cotton farm out in western New South Wales. Sophia changed the flow of the conversation.

'I think that if a time shift happened, it may have happened when the weather changed from calm and sunny to stormy. It seemed to happen in an instant. Weather doesn't change like that, does it, Lloyd?'

'It definitely doesn't, Sophia, and I think you might be right about some type of time shift, although it leaves me wondering whose technology could do something like that and how could they do it to us remotely?'

Suddenly Alex remembered,

'My shower, remember all those years ago, how I couldn't account for an hour? I'm sure I told you. I walked into my shower at 10.00 in the morning; I had a five-minute shower and walked out of the shower at 11.05. All the clocks suggested that I'd been in the shower for over an hour when in fact I was sure it was only five minutes.'

'I remember the day you came over and told us about it,' said Eva. 'That was what gave you the idea that junk-DNA might have something to do with the organism's existence in time and set you off on your research.'

‘Actually, it happened on the day I first met Sophia at the Cosmo, with mother.’

‘So, we have a precedent,’ said Lloyd. ‘It would seem that you are the time shifter, Alex.’

‘So how did the rest of you get time shifted if I am the time shifter?’

‘Hmm, that gives us something to ponder over.’

‘While you are pondering, Lloyd, perhaps Sophia might hazard a guess,’ suggested Eva. Everyone smiled and looked at Sophia who already had an idea.

‘Well, if you think about it, we were all connected to each other via the boat, via our safety harnesses.’

‘Interesting, very interesting,’ mumbled Lloyd, ‘but who’s to know? You know something, I feel like a character in a bloody science fiction novel.’

‘Yeah,’ Alex agreed, ‘written by an escapee from the funny farm.’

‘I think you are being too harsh on the author,’ said Eva. ‘I mean how do you assume Isaac Newton would have reacted to someone using a mobile phone in his presence? The only thing separating his reality from insanity would have been time, about three hundred odd years of it. And that is how it is with us as related to this time shift technology. We are Newton and somebody has handed us a mobile phone and said, it’s for you. Except instead of a phone they’ve handed us time travel.’

Alex scanned the darkness and then looked up.

‘Ooh look, stars. There’s a break in the clouds.’

Everyone looked skyward. The stars shone with a brightness they could barely believe. Other than their faint, flickering reflections in the candlelight, the stars were the only other visible light in an otherwise pitch-black, silent, infinite universe.

4

They awoke at the first light of the pre-dawn. Mecca was anchored at the farthest extremity of a tributary of the Hawkesbury River. She was surrounded by high, heavily-wooded hills. Lloyd stuck his head out through the hatch and scanned their surroundings. All he could see was thick fog. He took note that the storm had completely abated. All was absolutely silent when suddenly in the distance he heard the unmistakable whip-cracking sound of the Eastern

Whipbird (*Psophodes olivaceus*). Even though he wasn't a birder, he did once take time to find out what made the strange sound. He also learnt that it might have been a lyrebird, which could imitate a whipbird or just about any other animal's call.

'Life,' he thought to himself.

Alex crawled out through the hatch and joined Lloyd in the cockpit.

'Wow, what a pea-souper,' he exclaimed. 'You can barely make out the bow.'

'Listen to the birdlife, Alex.'

The world beyond the fog began to wake into a symphony of birdsong. As they sat, almost in a trance, listening to the sounds of life invisible, they were startled by a fish jumping out of the water.

'Jesus, did you see that fish jump out of the water, Lloyd? It scared the crap out of me.'

'More life,' Lloyd commented. 'This is good.'

After a few minutes, Alex rose to his feet and walked up to the bow where he proceeded to relieve himself over the side. Suddenly he called out,

'Lloyd, hey Lloyd ...'

'Yes, Alex, what is it? Have you killed a fish?'

'No Lloyd, come up here and take a look at this.'

Lloyd clambered up to the bow and had a look. Alex showed him a rope that was tied to the pulpit. As they followed the line out into the fog, they were both shocked by what they saw. Tied to the other end of the rope, immersed in the mist, looking like a ghost floating on the calm water, was the dinghy. Alex was about to begin pulling on the rope when Lloyd stopped him.

'Hold it, Alex. Take a note of the way this rope is tied to the pulpit.'

Alex had no knowledge of knots, so Lloyd explained it to him.

'This is a buntline hitch. Whoever tied this knot knows how to tie knots. This is no accident. OK, let's pull the dinghy in now.'

They pulled the dinghy up to the bow, untied it and dragged it around to the stern where they tied it off to a cleat. They sat back in the cockpit and looked at each other with complete astonishment. Eva and Sophia poked their heads through the hatch and joined them.

'Good morning everyone,' said Eva.

'Good morning,' everyone replied.

'Boy it's foggy. You can't see past your nose,' observed Sophia.

'But at least the storm has subsided,' Lloyd answered.

'We found the dinghy,' Alex blurted out.

'Our dinghy?'

'That we lost in the storm?'

'That's right, girls. There it is, completely intact.'

Alex pointed at the dinghy tied up to the stern. Lloyd spoke with a haunting tone in his voice.

'We are not alone, guys. Somebody retrieved that dinghy twenty miles out to sea and towed it here and tied it up to the bow of the boat last night, with a bloody buntline hitch.'

They all looked at the dinghy. It still had the ten horsepower Yamaha attached to the stern and was also still covered by the custom-made, drum-tight tarpaulin, which kept the contents in and the water out.

'It must have bobbed around on the surface of the ocean like a cork,' said Lloyd.

'This has to be good news.'

'It's great news, Alex. I packed all the camping gear in the dinghy. There are three tents, airbeds, butane bottles, cookers, utensils, spare fuel, knives, spear guns, fishing rods, nets and extra food. Getting the dinghy back substantially improves our lifestyle and chances of survival.'

'Oh my God, Lloyd, you used the 'S' word. I was hoping that no one would ever use that word. Surely we are better than that.'

'You are right, Eva, I'm sorry. We will thrive, that's what we'll do.'

'Yeah,' affirmed Alex, 'especially if invisible people who are great at tying knots keep bringing us stuff every night.'

Everyone laughed nervously.

'I'm going to make scrambled eggs,' said Sophia. 'Who is for scrambled eggs and coffee?'

Everyone raised their hand.

They ate their breakfast in silence. Every now and then, one of them looked up and looked around the boat straining to see something through the fog.

'There's got to be somebody out there,' said Lloyd in a perplexed voice. 'Somebody retrieved our dinghy for us ... and buntline hitches don't tie themselves.'

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Chapter Sixty-Five

NOOSA

1

Thebe, Lucy and Slater hovered about 300 feet above main beach, Noosa, semi-comfortably ensconced within Thebe's two-seater space ship. The girls sat in the seats while Slater sat straddled on a duffel bag full of clothes between and behind them. The interior was packed with their most precious possessions such as levitation suits and surfboards.

They viewed the exterior on a spherical, holographic display, which perfectly rendered the outside of the ship in sharp, crystal-clear colour. It was *7.20am, East Australian time, on the 24th of September 2023.*

'Take a good look, guys,' said Thebe, 'I expect all this to disappear in exactly three minutes.'

'There's no one on the beach,' observed Slater.

'They're all probably glued to their TVs watching the comet,' suggested Lucy.

'It is my guess that one would have to be living in a cave somewhere to not be tuned into the television broadcast right now,' said Thebe. 'Here we go ... three ... two ... one ...'

She voiced the countdown as calmly as if she was counting down an egg timer.

In the blink of an eye, the town of Noosa was gone. It was replaced by pristine bushland. The course of the river, too, was instantly changed. Also, the two rocky groynes, which controlled the sand flow along the beach and the river channel, disappeared as if they were digitally erased.

'Whoah, that wasn't even a morph,' exclaimed Slater. 'That was a hard edit.'

'Yes,' said Thebe with amazement in her voice. Lucy and Slater both looked at her. She reminded them,

'You must remember that it is as incredible for me as it is for you. I've never done this before either.'

Slater looked east and noted,

'The points look the same and there is a small swell running ... and there's no one out!'

'Let's look for a good spot to land,' suggested Thebe. She began to fly the ship very slowly upriver. 'I can't wait to see Kane,' she sighed. 'I know that it's been just a week, but it *feels* like a hundred years.'

'It's the longest he has ever been apart from us,' added Slater, also missing their son badly.

Almost immediately, they noticed a circle of round, white tents located on the grassy bank at the junction where Weyba Creek flowed into Noosa River.

'There they are!' exclaimed Slater. 'They've set up camp right on Munna Point. What a perfect spot. Wow, everything's been washed away ... all the bridges ... and buildings ...'

'There are the ships,' said Thebe excitedly.

'I feel like I'm tripping,' said Lucy.

'The camp looks like tepees,' observed Slater.

As they glided upriver towards the camp, they noticed people standing by the edge of the water, waving.

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Chapter Sixty-Six

GRIFFIN

1

The tip of Griffin's pick-mattock broke through into space. He whispered, 'Hold it!'

The pitch-black was only broken by the lime-green beams of the headband LEDs piercing through the suspended dust. He shone the light through the hole but couldn't make anything out. He did feel, though, the finest of breezes on his face and a new smell the like of which he never smelt before. He had no words to describe it. Fin and Tip lay on their bellies in the darkness behind him. He swung again breaking away more earth. He scooped the loose dirt with the mattock and pushed it beneath and behind him. As it came back to Fin, she scooped it underneath her, back to Tip, who in turn scooped it underneath her, back into the tight, claustrophobic tunnel.

'The breathing is getting easier,' he said. 'The air seems fresher on the other side of this hole.'

The stale air in the subterranean base had been recycled through the filters for a century. Lately, though, the base was beginning to struggle with broken-down machinery. As a consequence, the air quality was on a steady decline and things were looking grim.

'Keep digging, Griff,' grunted Tip as she pulled on the rope with which she dragged their three backpacks, which were full of supplies, behind her.

The hole became wider as Griffin picked and scraped at its sides. After half an hour or so he said,

'I think I can crawl through now.'

He proceeded to drag his body through the tight opening.

'This must be what being born feels like,' he grunted as he struggled to drag himself through. Fin laughed and said,

'I was doing just fine without that image, thank you, Griffin.'

Griffin finally pulled his legs through the hole. He found himself lying on about a thirty-degree slope of rocks and dirt in what, based on the echo patterns,

seemed to him like a large cavern. He pulled his facemask off his face, breathed in deeply and reported,

‘The air is really good in here.’

The girls pulled themselves through the opening with less effort, as they were both smaller and leaner. They removed their facemasks. Tip pulled the backpacks through and untied them from the rope. They all put their packs on their backs and sat on the dirt slope. Tip coiled the rope and put it over her shoulder. It was pitch black. The air was so clear that they could not see their headlamp beams at all.

‘Ahhh, this is good air!’ exclaimed Fin taking a deep breath.

‘Like breathing for the first time!’ added Tip.

‘We’re in some kind of chamber,’ said Griffin. ‘Let’s go down this slope, but be careful not to kick up too much dust. We wouldn’t want to spoil this great air.’

Like three black cats, with glowing green lights in the middle of their foreheads, the trio carefully negotiated their descent through the total darkness.

After descending for about fifty feet they arrived at the base of the slope.

2

Griffin, Fin and Tip wore tough, standard-issue, well-fitting, Gore-Tex overalls incorporating a hood, which was mainly used for sleeping in. On their feet they wore ultra-tough, ultra-lightweight, L.L. Bean Survivor boots. On their hands they wore tough, tightly-fitting, Crawler Gore-Tex gloves. Hanging around their necks were their Hyperflex facemasks. The facemasks were a one-piece item, the top half being goggles and the bottom half being designed for breathing through a filter. The facemasks were mostly used in dust-contaminated air and were of superior design, being very flexible and form fitting, and not at all restricting. On their heads they wore their headbands, which incorporated the LED cluster on the forehead and the battery all the way round within the headband itself. The efficiency of the light emitting diode gave their headlamps 2,400 hours of battery life.

They began moving along the flat. Griffin clicked his tongue and listened for the echoes. That was his means of navigation in the black.

Beneath his feet the ground felt sandy in between the plethora of rocky debris.

'This way, judging by the echo,' he whispered, 'and the drift in the air seems to be coming from here as well.'

They shone their green LEDs directly in front of their feet and nimbly navigated over the uneven terrain. As they made progress through their nanoscopic universe, in uneven steps, they noticed that the rocky debris beneath their boots was thinning out. There was more sand now. Suddenly Griffin paused. He looked down then rotated his heel in the sand.

'There's solid floor an inch under this sand.' He dragged the inside of his boot through the sand and whispered, 'And it's smooth.'

They moved forward, easier now, towards the good air. Patches began to appear in the sand. Griffin shone his light into one of them and whispered,

'We appear to be walking on black and white ceramic tiles.'

They were in absolute pitch black and all they could see was what their short-range, LED headlamps could pick up, which, so far, was nothing more than the ground terrain directly in front of their feet.

'I think we're in a base. And seeing that the floor is the same as in our base, this must be our base on the other side of the collapse. Let's have a rest here and have something to eat.'

They pulled off their backpacks and sat on the ground in an inward facing triangle, illuminating one another. They each took out a Food Bar and unwrapped it.

3

One hundred years before, a vicious earthquake collapsed a long section of one of the arterial tunnels of the subterranean base. The cave-in isolated one sixth of the base from the rest. Had it been any other section, it would have been all right, but it turned out to be section one, the section that contained all the lift wells and the only way to the surface. Five sixths of the base were trapped underground without any hope of ever seeing the surface again.

Confined in the entombed part was Robert Griffin III, aka RG3, who was, at that time, the last President of the United States and had been, prior to his presidency, a quarterback for the Redskins football team.

Captive as he was, one mile underground, he experienced a great deal of difficulty seeing eye-to-eye with the military, but there was little he could do

about it. The military had total control of the base. So, he made things as bearable as he could for himself and his family. As he aged, he began to write a journal. He wrote about things like the sky, and wind and the sun and moon and stars ... and trees and animals. He wrote about a world above, where there was no ceiling ... 'it goes on forever'. The children listened in awe and disbelief as he read them passages from his journal just before sleep time.

He also wrote about section one, the section involved with the collapse of arterial tunnel one. He wrote that there was no way of knowing if there was anything left of section one. He made a special point of emphasizing two things.

One, he wrote that if section one was intact, within reason, it would be the only possible way to the surface, one mile above. He described the three main lift wells, which were the only possible link with the 'world above'.

The second thing he emphasized was that his journal be passed on down from father to son and be read just before sleep time, one member of the family reading it to the rest. He also added that he thought it best for the journal to be kept a secret ... 'within the family'.

4

Griffin, who was a fifth-generation direct descendant of RG3, now carried the journal. He longed to see the world above, 'the world of light,' and he had infected his two best friends, since almost birth, with his dream. He also knew that no one in the base, outside his family and his friends' father, knew about the world above because that knowledge had died out a couple of generations before, and people had been born, had children, got old and died, and basically existed for their whole lives inside a skyless nanouniverse, believing that that was all there was. In the end, RG3s journal remained the last remnant of an old myth.

'Read us a page, Griffin.'

'Both you girls want me to read you a page, eh?'

'Come on, Griff.'

'OK then, seeing as you asked so nicely.'

He shuffled in his backpack and retrieved the journal. He opened on his favorite page and began to read slowly. The page was beautifully illuminated in the green light of his LED headlamp.

'Above is the sky. It goes on forever, this nothingness. And in the sky is a big bright light that shines, and lights up everything for as far as the eye can see. It is called the sun.

'Below is the world, which is huge, and is a floating ball that turns in this nothingness. It is called the Earth. Half the turn is light. This is called day. Half the turn is dark. This is called night. In the night is an equally impressive light, just as big, but pale and without color. It lights things in a silver light. It changes shape from a circle to a crescent and completely disappears on some nights. It is called the moon.

'Then there are the stars. There are millions of them and they are like tiny twinkling lights, very, very far away in the dark sky. Have you had enough?'

'No ... read some more.'

'Read about the lift wells?'

Griffin flipped some pages over and began to read the part about the lift wells.

'It says here that there are three lift wells. Long vertical shafts, all the way to the surface, it says. There'll be light at the end of the shaft. The light shines for twelve hours and goes out the other twelve. It says here that the bases of the shafts go down another three levels, so if there's no lift in the shaft it's probably down there.' He quoted the next section word for word. 'Although I've never looked inside the shafts, it is highly probable that each shaft has within it some kind of emergency ladder, in case of lift failure, so people could climb out of there. If there's a lift jammed half way up the shaft, one would have to climb up around it.'

Griffin thought for a while then looked up from the journal and said,

'We might think about looking for those shafts.' He looked around into the absolute blackness surrounding them, thought for a moment, then finally suggested, 'I think we should follow the good air. It might lead us to the shafts.' He looked into their lights and asked, 'How are the hunger pangs by the way?'

'I'm good.'

'Me too.'

They each had a sip from their canteens, rose to their feet and put on their packs. Re-energized from their Food Bars, the girls hushed as Griffin clicked his tongue and smelt the air.

'This way, I think,' he said, and set off into the ultra-black.

5

After a few minutes of careful walking they came to a fork in the tunnel. Griffin clicked his tongue and listened.

'This tunnel is dividing into two. There is a left way and a right way.' He asked the girls, 'Smell the air and tell me which tunnel.'

Both girls smelt the air and felt for the subtle drift in it.

'It's coming from the right tunnel,' said Fin.

'I agree,' Tip agreed.

'I think so as well,' said Griffin. They proceeded to make their way down the center of an invisible, smooth-floored, subterranean passage.

They followed the circles of green light through the blackness watching the dust-covered tiles beneath their boots change from white to black to white to black. All of a sudden, in a shock movement, Griffin braked to a reflex stop. He could see in his circle of light that he was tottering on the edge of a black precipice with too much forward momentum. He swung his arms trying to prevent himself from overbalancing and falling over the edge. Just as he felt himself losing his balance, and beginning to fall into a black abyss, he was pulled back by his backpack.

'Gotcha!' said Fin.

'Whiew ... that was close,' he exclaimed as he caught his breath from the shock. 'Thanks, Fin. You saved my life.'

'Don't mention it, Griffonickel.' She called him Griffonickel on special occasions. It was her more loving name for him. 'What are friends for?'

They stepped back from the edge.

'We have to be more careful now,' he said. 'This could be one of the lift wells. Let's see where this edge goes.'

They came to a point a few feet along where the edge stopped and came to a wall. They tracked the edge in the other direction and came to another wall.

'That's about, what ... ten feet? This could be a doorway.'

'Might be a lift well,' said Tip.

'Let's look for the other two,' said Griffin.

They explored along the wall to the left and right of the opening. They found two more openings on the right side of the one they nearly walked into.

'It's the lift wells all right. There are no doors on them.'

'Maybe they never had doors,' suggested Fin.

'Naturally,' responded Griffin. 'Why would they have doors?'

'I wonder where the lifts are?' queried Tip.

'Probably at the bottom of the shafts by now,' replied Griffin. 'We should rest here and have a nap before we look for a way up. I might read some more about the shafts.'

They sat in the middle of the black-and-white, ceramic-tiled floor in an inwardly facing triangle. Griffin flicked through the pages of the journal.

'Here it is, the warning about the shafts.' He read, 'The same earthquake that collapsed tunnel one, might have done some damage to the shafts. Some of them, maybe all of them, might be occluded and impassable. But there's always a chance that at least one of them stayed intact.'

Pretty soon they were all too tired to even think. They pulled their hoods over their heads, switched off their lights, and used the backpacks for pillows. They all slept tightly huddled together, with Griffin in the middle, Fin on his right and Tip on his left, both with their arms around him. It was totally silent and totally black as they slept. At that moment, their universes only manifested as a smooth, solid floor, gravity and each other. That was all that was actually real. The rest was just ideas, memories and imagination. Perhaps that was all that was necessary.

6

'There's a ladder!' exclaimed Griffin as he shone his light on the left wall just inside the opening into the left shaft. They chose that shaft because, clearly, it was the one through which the good air was flowing. The other two shafts smelt not as good and there was no breeze. 'It just disappears up into the darkness.'

'That would be the way to go then,' said Fin.

'Yeah, but we need to set ourselves up with rope and some biners. We want to be able to take rests on the ladder. Clip on and hang. It's going to be a long way

up ... and who is to know if the ladder is intact all the way up. We might have to climb back down.'

'At least the air will be good,' said Tip.

'That is a big plus,' added Fin.

A thought about their father flashed through the girls' minds.

Griffin took the rope from Tip and cut three lengths with his knife. He retrieved a small, butane blowtorch from his pack and sealed the ends. He fashioned three slings and fastened a karabiner to each one. The slings passed under their armpits and around their backs with the karabiner in front. With that arrangement they could clip onto the ladder and lean back a little, supported by the sling. This would allow them to rest. They put their backpacks on over their slings, which secured the slings into place, then pushed their facemasks behind their necks. Griffin looked inside the shaft and stepped across onto the ladder. He looked down and saw nothing but black. There was just the rectangle entrance into the shaft being lit by the girls' LEDs.

'How does the ladder feel?' Fin asked.

'Solid,' came the reply. He gingerly climbed up a few rungs. 'Feels good.' He continued to climb. Fin stepped out onto the ladder and began to climb. Finally, Tip stepped onto the ladder and looked up. She was amazed at how far up the shaft she could see because of Fin and Griffin's lights lighting the way ahead of her.

The ladder was about a foot and a half wide with one-inch diameter, round pipe for the rungs. They were better to hold onto than they were to stand on. Fortunately, the threesome's excellent carbon-fiber-reinforced boot soles efficiently spread the load out beneath their feet, thus reducing their fatigue. The rungs were spaced in one-foot intervals.

Griffin looked up. In his light he could only make out about eight rungs ahead. They just disappeared up into the blackness, but they kept coming. The more he climbed, the more rungs appeared. And, 'the breeze ... the sweet breeze, man ...' He spoke in the manner of his father, and his father's father before him.

7

There are 5280 feet in a mile. There were around about that many rungs on the ladder, which was bolted to the concrete wall on the left side of the left shaft. After about 100 rungs he stopped, clipped onto a rung, looked down and asked,

'How are you two girls progressing down there?' He could see their lights just below him.

'Fine.'

'No problems here, Griff.'

'Clip on for a couple of minutes and try out the slings. Mine's pretty good.'

He was surprised by how much pressure he could take off his feet when he let the sling take his weight. After a few minutes break, he asked,

'Ready for another hundred?'

'Lead the way,' came the reply.

'There are over 5000 steps, Fin,' said Tip.

'Yes, it's inconceivable.'

'We can talk about dad on the way up, if you like?'

'That's a good idea. We haven't talked about dad in a long time.'

8

Tip and Fin were twin sisters. They were sixteen years old. Griff was seventeen. They were all born in the base. They grew up living next door to one another because their families lived in adjacent cubicles. The girls' father, Rip, was a survivor. He was an odd-jobs man, a fixer of things, and there weren't many professions more lucrative, down in the base, as that. Things were forever breaking down around the place. He did the odd job on the side, in secret, and got paid in Food Bars. He saved and stored a couple of drawers full of those Food Bars. In the end he had enough to sustain three people for 2,400 hours. He was thinking about an escape, but not for himself. It was all for his daughters and their best friend, Griffin. Over the years, Griffin confided Rip into the knowledge within his family's secret journal. They were good friends. Even though Rip knew what was written in the journal, he felt too old to be bothered to do anything about it. 'I'm contented,' he insisted. 'Got everything I want right here. But you kids, you ought to have a go. Take it from me, I ought to know, this base is dying. Everything is breaking down, but it's the air filters that are going to eventually do us all in.'

Thirty percent of them are down and beyond repair. The air is going to go bad. I think in the end we'll all just go to sleep and not wake up.'

'He is a cheery fellow that father of ours, isn't he?' said Fin climbing the ladder.

'Oh yes, quite cheery,' replied Tip.

It was Rip who taught the kids caving and climbing skills, and work with rope. They grew up strong, lean and nimble, and he hatched a plan for them. He organized their clothing for the journey as well as the backpacks, half of each backpack being filled by three months-worth of Food Bars.

The Bars were rationed out to all the citizens of the base. The limit was two Food Bars per person, per 24 hours. It was deemed sufficient, and it probably was because the Bars were incredible, the latest technology.

A small regiment of deliverymen dropped two Food Bars, for every person in the cubicle, into their officially-sanctioned receptacle. The Bars were rationed out from Central Food Storage. None but the highest ranks in the military knew the true status of ration reserves, but no one seemed to be too concerned about that. There appeared to be supplies aplenty. It was the breaking-down machinery that was the thorn in the side of the ranks.

At the time chosen by Rip, they set off towards arterial tunnel one. Rip's parting gifts were a sturdy pick-mattock, a pair of powerful, 120-year-old binoculars, a compass, and to each one he gave a Bundeswehr Advanced Combat Knife (BW-ACK). 'This will be an indispensable friend,' he said to each of them as he gave them the knife. He also gave the girls his precious hand-written copy of the Tao Te Ching, as well as other writings. As he gave them these things, he kissed each one on the cheek and said to them,

'May God place the stepping stones beneath your feet and cut the way before you as you progress on your journey.'

He saw himself as an archer, with a powerful bow, and humanity was the arrow that he was firing across a gulf of darkness into an unknown beyond, a beyond he had read about in RG3s journal.

'I hope dad's OK back there in the base,' Fin said as she continued climbing.

'Yeah, me too,' said Tip.

'That's five hundred rungs,' said Griff. 'I'm bushed. Let's have a rest.'

'How many more to go?' Tip asked.

Fin replied cheerfully, 'Oh only about four-thousand odd.'

'Well that's less than when we started.'

They all clipped themselves onto a rung and rested.

'Do you think that we'll be able to sleep like this?'

'Depends on how tired we get, Fin,' replied Griffin. 'Just make sure you can't slip out of your sling if you drop off to sleep.'

They switched off their lights and rested, but couldn't sleep. Pitch black and total silence was everything.

10

About an hour later, they began to climb again. It felt to them like they were climbing an endless ladder to nowhere. It just kept materializing out of the black beyond his light beam. They climbed in bursts of ten minutes, about a hundred rungs, and rested for ten minutes.

'5280 divided by 300 equals 17.6,' said Griffin looking at his faintly-glowing wristwatch. 'We are doing a hundred rungs every twenty minutes. That's 300 an hour. At the current rate, without any major breaks, we should be able to do the climb in about 18 hours. That's our best time.'

'I'm up for it,' said Fin.

'Same here,' added Tip.

They climbed and rested and climbed and rested, for six hours.

'You know, we're extremely fortunate not to have encountered any obstacles,' said Griffin.

'Like what?' asked Fin.

'Ohh, just off the top of my head, parts of the ladder missing.'

'Don't even think such thoughts, Griffin.'

'Yes, think something else.'

'OK, I think we should have a longer break and try to get some sleep time.'

'Who can sleep, Griff, I'm too revved up,' said Tip, 'This is the most exciting thing I've ever done in my life.'

'I doubt that I can sleep either,' added Fin.

'OK ... well ... we'll try to rest then.'

They were about one third of the way up the tall, black, concrete shaft.

After their break and a Food Bar each, and a mouthful of water from their canteens, they resumed their climb. They took their second 'big break' thirteen hours into the climb.

'We'll take the next break in five hours and leave ourselves fresh for the final push.'

'That's a good plan, Griffin, but I'm feeling pretty good. This is a pretty comfortable pace for me.'

'Same here, Griff.'

'Nice to see you girls are good to go.'

'I wonder if we'll see the light like it says in the journal,' said Fin.

'Remember, it goes out for twelve hours,' Tip reminded them.

'I've been wondering about the light as well,' said Griffin.

They continued to climb into darkness with their glowing LED headlamps lighting up the ladder above them in a soft, lime-green glow.

With a theoretical three hundred rungs to go, they stopped for their final rest. They hung in their slings and chomped on their Food Bars.

'The air's really getting better,' said Griffin.

They were having a sip of water when Fin said,

'Hey, switch the lights off. I want to see something.'

They switched off their headlamps and looked up into the void and waited for their eyes to adjust to the black. Fin had the sharpest eyes.

'Look, up there, like a faint silver dot, right there in the middle ... it's only faint.'

As everyone's eyes adjusted to the total darkness, a faint silver dot of light became plainly visible to all of them. And the ladder was heading straight towards it.

As they climbed in their final push, Fin noted,

'That light might be the light of what RG3's journal called the surface.'

'It might be the light of the dark twelve hours,' suggested Tip, 'the silver light that shines in the dark.'

'I think it's called the moon,' added Fin.

They continued the climb almost resenting their ten-minute breaks. Griffin was well disciplined, though, having been well taught, by Rip, about fatigue and pacing oneself.

With one hundred rungs to go, the silver light was now a silvery rectangle and Fin could suddenly plainly see a focused, bright-white dot emerge into the silvery rectangle. It shone with a light the like of which she had never seen before, shining with an intensity she found almost difficult to look at.

'I think I see a star. Oh my God!'

Immediately they all saw it. It became brighter until it was brighter than all the silver light in the rectangle surrounding it. Griffin stopped climbing and clipped onto a rung. The girls followed suit. At the peak of its brightness, the point of light shone directly down the shaft and subtly lit it all the way down to where they were hanging. They could, for the first time, see the walls of the shaft recede towards the rectangle of silver light. As they gazed at the star, hypnotized by its indescribable beauty, it quickly faded and disappeared from the rectangle. The shaft darkened and there was now just the faint silver rectangle again. They switched on their lights, unclipped, and pulled themselves up to the next rung.

.....

Chapter Sixty-Seven

TRANCE MARINARA

1

Mecca elegantly glided out of the Hawkesbury River, mid-morning, with her blood-red sails fully unfurled and glowing, wing-on-wing, picking up the light, westerly tailwind. Alex sat on the bow trying to see 'what the wind was doing outside'.

'I think it's a north-easter, Lloyd,' he announced.

'Well, that at least makes our minds up for us, Alex. We head south to Sydney Harbour.'

They drifted out to sea, past the demolished Barrenjoey lighthouse, and waited for the expected northeaster.

Sophia asked, 'How many times have you predicted the wind, Alex?'

'Never, one who shines like the sun. This is my first time.'

Eva chuckled, 'That's a chart topper. You never called *me* one who shines like the sun, Lloyd.'

'Sincere apologies, exquisite perfection. I shall endeavor to rectify this grave error, on my part, and call you one who shines like the sun at first opportunity.'

'Sank you,' she said in a satisfied voice.

It did not take long for those first gusts to come wafting in and gently blowing the sleek sloop down the east coast of Australia towards Port Jackson and the imposing Sydney Heads.

They recognized all the beaches on the way down. Lloyd and Eva used to love driving the 'Aston' up to Palm Beach, for a seafood lunch. They sailed past Whale Beach, where 'Dr. Strangelove', their biologist friend, lived.

'Avalon, ohh Avalon,' Lloyd sighed.

'There are no houses anywhere, dear,' said Eva. 'It's all bush.'

They were sailing about half a mile off the beaches and a little closer rounding the headlands. The sea was still 'lively' from the day before, but smooth on the surface. The pace was leisurely at about four knots.

'Why don't you throw up the kite, darling?' Eva asked sunning her face.

'Because, sweetheart, I know that as soon as I put it up, the wind will pick up and I'll have to pull it down again. How many times has that happened to us?'

'Everyone for some peppermint tea,' Sophia offered, 'and a biscuit?'

'Yes please,' they all replied.

It was a perfect east coast spring day. The temperature was about 26 degrees, there were only small tufts of cumulus in an otherwise clear blue sky and the northeaster had picked up to about ten knots. It was a T-shirt and shorts kind of day.

'Why don't you put on some music, Alex?' Sophia called from the cabin.

'Yes, Alex, put on some music,' Eva agreed.

Mecca cut a fine bow wave as she glided effortlessly in the gentle tailwind. Like a fractal of the whole, the delicate sounds of Seals and Crofts' *Summer Breeze* embellished the air. Mecca sailed close to her 6-knots hull speed because she was designed sleek for efficient downwind running.

By the time they sailed down to Manly they were astounded by the lack of infrastructure. There was nothing anywhere on shore. No buildings, just bush, cliffs and pristine beaches. They sailed as close as they dared. They rounded Fairy Bower and sailed south.

'About an hour and we'll be in the harbor,' said Lloyd.

An hour later, they sailed through Sydney Heads directly into the setting sun.

2

'We need to find a place to anchor before it gets dark,' said Lloyd.

'What about Watson's Bay, darling,' suggested Eva.

'Good idea ... and it's close as well.'

Once inside the Heads, their first task was to drop the main and roll up the jib. After that was complete, and everyone was safely in the cockpit again, Lloyd kicked over the diesel and motored south, deeper into the harbor. Ten minutes later, they putted around a small headland, to port, and entered Watson's Bay.

'Oh my God!' exclaimed Eva placing her hands over her cheeks in total astonishment.

Lloyd shifted the drive into neutral and let the diesel idle. They glided to a tranquil stop. It was as if they were temporarily hypnotized, frozen in a stare

because everything was gone. The pier, the restaurant and pub, all the houses, all the moored boats, everything had vanished. They were staring into a calm bay, with a pristine beach, backed by a natural, grassy clearing, behind which was bush.

‘It looks like before anybody got here,’ whispered Sophia.

‘It’s almost spooky,’ whimpered Alex.

‘It’s beautiful,’ exclaimed Lloyd. ‘and as perfect an anchorage as one could hope for.’

‘How are we going to get to the beach, Lloyd? The dinghy is full of supplies.’

‘Hmm, I guess we aren’t. We are as comfortable on board as anywhere ... for the time being. We’ll see what we can do in the morning.’

As darkness descended upon the compact sloop, the two couples enjoyed a ‘glass of bubbly’. The girls, in a creative fit, cooked up a delicious spaghetti bolognese. They ate their dinner admiring the long line of silver moon-crystals reflecting off the water. Sophia whispered as if in a haunted reverie,

‘How the water shimmers like mercury.’

‘If it’s calm tomorrow,’ said Lloyd, ‘we can bring Mecca right up to the beach.’

They slept like babes in their bunks that night. They were adjusting to life on board and it was all beginning to feel like a long coastal cruise away from civilization. They had enough food on board for a month, and plenty of fuel and water. Alex and Sophia slept in the bow, in the ‘luxury’, double-bunk V-berth. Lloyd and Eva slept in single bunks on either side of the main hatch. The ‘cozy’ bunks extended sternward under the cockpit benches. Lloyd preferred to sleep close to the open hatch, ‘to keep an eye on the situation’ he always said.

3

It was only the morning of the third day since the storm. It felt longer to them. Although there was no way of them knowing it, it was the morning of *September 27th 2123, east-Australian time*, and some of them were already beginning to have trouble remembering the day.

‘It is my big failing, Lloydie,’ said Eva gazing across the bay at first light. ‘Whenever I go on these holidays, the first thing I forget is the day of the week.’

‘That is a positively catastrophic failing, scrumptious.’

'I slide into trance marinara ... and time ceases to exist.'

'Nirvana ... I'm so happy for you, darling.'

'And I love our Mecca,' she said fondly.

He looked across the water at the rising sun, then looked into her eyes and whispered,

'You do shine like that sun, darling.'

'Oh, surely not *that* bright,' she replied modestly.

'Brighter.' He hugged and kissed her. With his arm around her, he looked at the beach and said, 'We're together, that's all that matters.' He thought for a while and concluded, 'I'll have to get a feel for the tide to figure out the best time to beach her. It should preferably be done on a rising tide.'

They turned and looked over the stern. They had a view deep into the harbor, right up to where the Bridge, the Opera House and all the tall buildings used to stand. It was as if everything had been swept away, erased. The treetops were the tallest things now.

'A 500-foot tidal surge would have scraped the ground clean down to bedrock,' he theorized. 'Once the debris started, the city destroyed itself. I bet it's all rubble somewhere on the other side of Penrith, piled up against the Blue Mountains.'

Alex and Sophia emerged from below.

'Good morning. How does it look?' Alex asked.

'Pristine,' replied Lloyd gazing over the water into the distance.

They decided to have breakfast. Eva scrambled some eggs and they had toast with strawberry jam and coffee. They each took their multi-vitamin tablets.

After breakfast, Lloyd finally figured out that,

'The tide is going out. It looks about half tide at the moment. It won't be good for beaching till this afternoon.'

'Why don't we go look at our house,' suggested Eva soaking up the warmth of the morning sun.'

'I have serious doubts that there'll be anything left of it, scrumptious.'

'We could have an explore around the harbor, Lloyd,' said Alex, 'while we wait for the tide.'

'I guess we could have a bit of a punt around,' Lloyd replied.

They pulled up anchor and set off.

4

'There's not a skerrick of the house left standing,' said Eva. 'It's as if it had never existed.'

'It's like the ground got swept clean,' replied Lloyd, 'and then the bush grew back.' He panned around Rose Bay with his arm and speculated, 'A five-hundred-foot tidal wave ... the water could have surged through here at 100 knots ... carrying all the debris, it would have swept the ground clean ... of everything.'

As they motored past where the great colossus, The Sydney Harbor Bridge, once stood, they were amazed by the way even the huge concrete abutments had been ripped out of the earth and carried away by the tidal surge.

They motored around Circular Quay.

'So much for the Opera House. What was that? 100 million?'

'Yep, Alex, one hundred, but money well spent,' Lloyd replied.

'Ooh, look over there!' exclaimed Eva as she aimed the binoculars across the water towards the northern shore. 'There is a flock of white cockatoos in the branches of a tall tree over there. Some are flying.'

'And I've seen a seagull,' added Alex.

'Have you?' Lloyd asked, surprised. 'I haven't seen any of those, although we know there are fish.'

'And bellbirds,' added Sophia.

They ate sandwiches for lunch while floating adjacent to where their house used to be, in their usual spot, except the jetty wasn't there either. After lunch they motored off in the direction of Watson's Bay where they intended to make camp for the night.

5

Alex jumped off the bow onto dry beach sand. He was barefoot and wore a T-shirt and a pair of board-shorts. He pulled on the bow rope.

'I'll bring the dinghy around, Alex,' said Lloyd similarly attired. He walked the dinghy around and handed its rope to Alex who pulled it up onto the beach. Lloyd and the girls joined Alex on the sand. They began to unpack the dinghy. First were the three lightweight, four-person, dome tents, which they set up on the grassy clearing just above the beach. They transferred the rest of the gear and

supplies from the dinghy into one of the tents. When the dinghy was empty, they pushed it back into the water. Lloyd and Alex jumped back on the sloop as Eva started up the dinghy's outboard motor.

Mecca backed away from the beach and circled around to a good anchoring depth. Alex 'dropped the pick'. They closed the hatch and climbed into the dinghy for the ride back to shore.

Eva immediately began fishing for Bream, using ham as bait, while the boys placed some stones in a circle for a fire on the beach. They finally set up a picnic table and four chairs and sat down. Sophia began thinking about making dinner while Lloyd brought out four glasses and a bottle.

'I've got a nice Merlot,' he said.

'Caught one,' Eva called out from down near the water, 'and it's a big one.' She briskly re-baited her hook and cast the line for another fish. Lloyd filled her glass and brought it down to her.

'A treat for my precious.'

'Mind my equilibrium, Lloyd, I'm in the zone ... thank you ... ooh, ooh, I think I've got another one.'

By dusk, Eva caught eight healthy Bream. They fried them in olive oil in a pan over an open fire.

'Delightful evening ...'

'It is indeed, Eva my darling.'

'I'll concur with that notion,' added Alex topping up everyone's glass.

'Second boddle,' said Sophia with a hint of a slur in her speech.

'Feeling a little tipsy, are we darling?'

'You know how it goes straight to my head, Alex. I am the cheapest drunk.'

'Yes, I know, my precious. We've saved a fortune over the years.'

The last time they slept on land was in their homes, in their beds, six nights before. The tents were much more comfortable to sleep in than the bunks in the boat. There was space enough for two people in one half and their things in the other.

6

Next morning, day four since the storm, found Eva peeking out of the tent, watching Lloyd and Alex collecting wood for the fire.

'There is ample deadwood around,' said Lloyd. 'This is well established bushland.'

'What do you reckon, fifty years-worth?'

'Fifty to sixty. Look at that big tree.'

'Good morning,' announced Sophia as she stepped out of her tent wearing her one-piece swimming costume. She was slender and very attractive. 'The water looks so inviting.' It was a crisp morning. She waded into the cool, crystal-clear water. 'It's all sand on the bottom,' she reported then dipped down and wet herself up to her neck. 'Brrr, it's very refreshing.'

Eva joined her soon after, looking like a gazelle in her bikini.

'It warms up as you become used to it,' said Sophia.

The men kept working on their fire. Occasionally they stopped and admired the way the golden glow of the morning sun lit up the opposite shore, and the way Mecca floated there looking like the perfect completion in a painting by J. M. W. Turner.

Alex brought out eggs and bacon, and a can of peeled tomatoes. He hydrated some dehydrated mushrooms. He cooked them all up over the fire and toasted some bread. Lloyd got the coffee going.

After breakfast they lounged around and sipped their coffees. They weren't certain of their next move so they decided to spend another day and night there, 'recharging the batteries'. They took swims and lay on the beach in the warm afternoon sun.

'We'll all turn into crocodiles,' said Eva.

Later she fished again, and again produced a banquet.

After dinner, they lounged around the fire. Mecca glowed softly in the firelight, in the midst of a floating carpet of diamonds. In the starry heavens above, the silver moon shone like a big, round, fluorescent light.

7

Eva stirred suddenly. She pointed into the sky.

'What is that, Lloyd?'

Lloyd's eyes needed to adjust from looking into the fire.

'Where?' he said.

Lloyd and Sophia looked in the direction Eva was pointing. For a moment there was nothing ... then ...

'There! ... It's a light ... and it's moving.'

'Life was becoming so delightfully dreary ...' Alex quipped as he struggled onto one elbow.

'It's gliding in a large circle,' observed Lloyd.

'Yes, around us,' said Eva with a hint of excitement in her voice.

'Doesn't look like a plane.'

'It looks like one of those UFOs in that TV show.'

'Actually, it looks exactly like that,' affirmed Lloyd.

They were referring to the record-breaking UFO documentary, *Incident at Green River*.

The softly-glowing, almond-shaped disc glided silently across the harbor towards the camp. It glided in over the water above its own imperfect reflection and stopped just beyond Mecca, silently hovering about five feet above the diamond-speckled surface. The four of them felt themselves being calmed.

'UFO, Lloyd,' whispered Alex. 'Get ready for some bending of the mind.'

'I'm ready,' said Sophia, totally awestruck.

'I wonder if it has anything to do with the light we saw in the storm?' said Eva.

'That one seemed friendly enough,' replied Lloyd.

The spaceship slowly, completely silently, levitated around the boat and towards the beach. Its soft, yellow light made the beach glow like it was being illuminated by a dimmed garden light. They could see now that it was made of some kind of polished silver metal.

It stopped just near the edge of the water, silently hovering about a foot in the air. There was no breeze or sound. Lloyd estimated it to be about sixty feet in diameter. When it completely stilled, a panel opened in the lower hull and extended down as a ramp, almost, but not quite, touching the sand. A young man, longhaired, barefoot and wearing faded jeans and a T-shirt, sauntered down the ramp. He was followed down by an older, fit-looking man who was similarly attired.

The two couples were stunned speechless, a rarity for them. They stood there, around their fire, mouths agape in total disbelief.

'Hello,' said the younger spaceship fellow. 'We spotted your fire.'

There was a momentary pregnant pause while they all looked at each other waiting for someone else to speak first. Suddenly Sophia blurted out,

'Would you care for a Merlot?'

The younger spaceship fellow smiled, 'A cup of tea would be nice.' His older companion smiled as well.

'Come and join us,' motioned Lloyd. He surprised his three companions when he asked, 'Will your er ... craft be all right hanging in the air like that?'

'Yes, perfectly all right, thank you,' Ben replied, 'I have her in park.'

They welcomed the two visitors into their camp and introduced themselves.

'This is Eva ...'

'How do you do ...'

'This is Sophia ...'

'Hello ...'

'Er ... this is Alex ...'

'Good evening ...'

'And I am Lloyd, skipper of Mecca, our trusty sloop out there.'

'I am Ben, and this is my father, Adam,' said the younger man.

'Lloyd and Eva, sounds vaguely familiar to me,' said Adam. 'What were you guys doing in '69?'

'Sydney University,' Eva replied.

'Not genetics by any chance?'

'Yes,' she smiled.

He smiled and asked, 'Remember Adam?'

'The dentist?' replied Lloyd with great surprise.

'What are the odds?' exclaimed Adam.

'Oh my God, the quiet dentist?' Eva remembered. 'I had an eye on him, Lloyd.'

Adam laughed, 'If I remember it correctly, Eva, everybody had their eyes on you. You haven't changed a bit.'

'Ha, like half a century doesn't make a difference.'

'None that I can see.'

Lloyd chuckled and said, 'You shall go far, Adam.'

'I can still remember your talk in the café at the uni, Lloyd, about evolution and telepathy, and Hiroshima. I'll never forget it.'

'I loved those times back then,' said Lloyd. He looked at the space ship. 'I have an Aston Martin, you know.'

Eva interjected, '*Had*, darling, had.'

'How does my student buddy, Adam, from the university cafe, get to ride in one of those?' Lloyd pointed at the levitating space ship. 'It must be quite a story.'

'It's a story and a half,' replied Adam. 'Enough to fill two books.'

'And you had a son?'

'Yes, Ben here. He's the pilot and it's his ship. I'm just the father.' Adam leaned over towards Lloyd and lowered his voice, 'Let me tell you, Lloyd, be nice to your kids ... because you never know ...'

'Eva and I were married,' said Lloyd, 'and we had twin sons, Leon and Russel. They lived out on the cotton farm in Warren. It depends on the present time ... er ... to guess whether they could still be alive or not. We have no idea what year it is, although we think that it might be in the future.'

'Affirmative,' said Ben. 'It is *Tuesday, September 28th 2123*.'

'2123? ... really?' said Eva.

'Everything is gone,' said Alex looking around the dark bay.

'Yes,' nodded Ben, 'the planet has been through a rough patch, but it looks better now.'

'How did we get here?' asked Lloyd.

Ben looked at everyone and finally looked at Alex and said,

'Alex was time shifted one hundred years into the future, and everything that was physically connected to him shifted with him.'

'I believe you postulated that theory, Sophia,' said Eva. 'Would you fellows like some maple syrup in your tea? It's peppermint.'

'Oooh, maple syrup, yes please, Eva,' said Ben.

'You don't know how amazing it is to see you both after all these years,' said Adam, 'I hadn't even met my friend, Nancy, when I knew you.'

'How fast can you go in one of those things?' Alex asked pointing at the spaceship. 'My Pantera could do 160.'

'My ship maxes out at the speed of light squared, Alex.'

He proceeded to tell them about the ship and the comet, and the big time-shift.

'So, is everyone dead?' Eva asked rather dramatically.

'Long time ago,' responded Ben calmly. 'A hundred years have passed since then.'

'We saw our sons two weeks ago,' said Lloyd.

'You are far from there now, in terms of time.'

'If they survived,' said Eva, 'our grandchildren could still be alive.'

Ben harbored no such illusions, however seeing his father's friends begin to grow concerned, he offered,

'Dad and I could stay the night and I could take you up in the ship tomorrow and we could fly out to where your sons lived.'

'Oh, could we?' Eva replied pleadingly.

'That would be very magnanimous of you, Ben,' said Lloyd.

'And dad could keep Alex and Sophia company while we are away.'

'By the way,' remembered Lloyd, 'did you fellows retrieve our dinghy the other night?'

'I don't recollect retrieving any dinghies,' replied Ben.

'Me either,' added his father.

8

They sat around the fire all much more relaxed now. They were becoming used to the levitating spaceship, and the visitors seemed 'normal enough'.

'It seems to me,' said Eva, 'that your non-coding DNA thesis results have come to fruition, Alex. Everyone died on the 23rd of September 2023. The only mystery that remains is how we manage to live for centuries.'

Ben, who was listening attentively, smiled and suggested that he may be able to solve that mystery for them. He rose to his feet, popped back into the ship and returned carrying a small container. He sat back down amongst them and showed them an intricately-carved, gold box. He opened it and explained the brown crumble inside.

'This is Mana,' he said. 'It is for wellbeing and longevity. One ingestion of Mana will double your lifespans. Regular use will extend them up to nine-hundred years.'

'I beg your pardon?' responded Alex, his voice breaking into falsetto.

They smoked the Mana that night and smoked it again after breakfast in the morning.

9

Ben reclined in the pilot's seat, Eva lounged in the passenger seat, while Lloyd straddled a duffel bag behind them. They were awestruck.

On the beach, Sophia complained, 'I'm so envious. I want to have a ride in the spaceship too.'

'I'm sure Ben will give you a ride when he gets back,' Adam consoled her. He held onto a carry bag containing his levitation pack and suit, which he retrieved from the ship before it launched.

Bathed in the soft interior glow, they watched the ship's hatch seal.

'You've brought your surfboards,' said Eva a little surprised.

'Yes, they travel everywhere with us,' Ben replied.

Openmouthed, Lloyd and Eva witnessed the translucent, spherical, holographic display materialize out of thin air. They could see everything in the exterior and hear all the ambient sounds. As the interior light dimmed, it appeared as though there was no hull surrounding them.

'The first thing you'll feel is mass neutralization,' instructed Ben. 'Movement will become effortless. Try to keep still. After the mass is neutralized, it will all seem like a big movie.'

As they began to rise vertically, Lloyd observed,

'Ah yes, I see, I'm weightless and there is no momentum or inertia. On the screen we look like we're moving, but it doesn't feel like we're moving in here.'

'Like sitting in a weightless theater,' added Eva.

'What do you use for controls?' Lloyd asked.

'My mind,' replied Ben.

'Would you mind refraining from asking those questions, darling,' Eva pleaded.

'With your mind?' Lloyd repeated.

'Yes, like you move your arms and legs.'

Ben knew better than to venture too deeply into the telepathic realm with a non-telepath.

They rose six hundred feet above Mecca. They were facing due west. Lloyd was awed by the broad expanse of thriving vegetation where the city used to be. There were just bays and rocky headlands, and pristine bush everywhere.

They rose further upward, in a backward drift, to three thousand feet. The harbor beaches glistened in the morning sun.

'It's completely erased of civilization,' said Ben looking up the harbor.

'Yes, water-blasted clean,' added Lloyd.

They began to fly forward at about 80 mph. They flew over Watson's Bay and Mecca, headed in a westerly direction.

'This used to be nothing but roofs,' said Lloyd.

'We're coming to a stream,' said Ben pointing.

'I think it's Cook's River. See, it flows into Botany Bay where the airport used to be. I think our heading should be a trifle more north-west for a heading towards Warren.'

'I agree with you sweetheart,' added Eva.

A few minutes later, headed in the new direction, Lloyd noted,

'There are the Blueys, and I think we've found our city.'

Piled up along the base contours of the Blue Mountains, was a line of heaped-up rubble and debris, partially overgrown by vegetation. The tallest piles were over 300 feet high. There were whole chunks of buildings protruding out of some of them. A section of the Nepean River was completely dammed up by concrete rubble. There was a lake where Penrith used to be.

Behind the rubble, the Blue Mountains rose to the Mount Bindo maximum elevation of 4468 feet.

The flight arc of their spaceship curved upwards gently as they flew towards the dissected plateau.

'It looks identical to how it always looked,' noted Lloyd.

'I believe that most of it used to be national park, darling,' said Eva.

'This really doesn't feel like flying, Ben,' Lloyd chuckled.

'Off-planet, Lloyd, you'll be glad that you can't feel some of the moves we pull out there. By the way, how far is Warren from Sydney?'

'Oh, as the crow flies, about 250 miles due north-west. ... Off planet??'

An arc of light appeared on the holographic display, which rested on the horizon away in the distance.

'That is the 250-mile line north-west of Sydney. Your farm should be somewhere near that line,' said Ben.

They skimmed a few hundred feet above the mountain plateau, silently slipping over the treetops, and glided out over the western slopes doing something like 150 mph. So far, they had not seen one building or section of road, anywhere. As the trees thinned out into the western plains, they began to see clumps of rubble dotting the ground up ahead.

'It looks like smaller chunks of Sydney got swept right over the Blue Mountains,' exclaimed Lloyd.

'The plains must have flooded with catastrophic floods,' said Ben.

'Maybe not so catastrophic,' whimpered Eva.

'The whole Pacific Ocean must have surged over the Great Dividing Range and poured into the plains,' said Lloyd in a dejected voice.

As they flew out over the western plains at an altitude of about 3000 feet, and a velocity of about 250 miles per hour, towards the arc of light, Lloyd remembered,

'This reminds me of a drive I once had with Alex. We christened his Pantera *The Beast* on that trip. We cruised at a hundred and fifty miles per hour on a road that obviously doesn't exist anymore.'

'There are no roads on our planet,' said Ben.

'No roads?' asked Eva, surprised.

'No. Everyone flies.'

'You don't say.' said Lloyd.

'People do walk, though,' added Ben.

'Oh, they do?'

'Yes, but not very far.'

'That is positively incredulous, don't you think so, darling?'

'I know a guy that builds levitation backpacks for non-telepaths such as yourselves,' said Ben. 'Perhaps I can hook you up with him?'

'Levitation backpacks sound like a hoot, Lloyd,' said Eva.

'I presume that they are some kind of gravitational device?'

'Affirmative, Lloyd.'

As they approached within fifty miles of the lime-green line, they plainly made out a new type of rocky debris radiating out from the target area ahead. It looked like ejecta. They soon spotted the circular shape of a giant crater up ahead.

'It must be thirty miles across,' said Ben.

As they approached closer, they could see into the crater. There was a small lake at the bottom of it.

'It looks like about a hundred years old,' observed Ben. 'See, there's not much water erosion on the sides.'

'I see,' said Lloyd.

'Thirty-mile-wide crater, 3000-feet deep, ... it would take about two and a half million mega-tons of TNT to make that kind of hole in the ground. That's about a two-mile chunk of rock impacting at about twelve miles per second. Nearly twenty cubic miles of ground was either melted or vaporized here.'

Lloyd and Sophia were amazed by Ben's grasp of the statistics. He slowed and stopped above the center of the crater.

'The visible fireball would have had about a thirty-mile diameter and got about a thousand times hotter than the sun.'

'Is this close to where our farm was, darling?'

'I doubt far from it, precious.'

'A big rock, eh? ... It grieves me to say it, but I think they might have bought it,' said Eva speaking in the fashion her parents used to speak about life in World War Two. 'Even if they survived a flood, the meteor would have finished them off.'

'I think that the meteor may have preceded the flood, darling.'

'Yes, I agree,' said Ben. 'The cometary debris would have come in a wave, all over the planet, behind the main comet. First the debris peppered the planet, then the tidal waves raged. Some of the debris landed on terra firma and caused huge explosions.'

'This did happen a hundred years ago, didn't it?' Eva asked sadly.

“Lloyd consoled her, ‘Yes, it has been over a hundred years, darling.’

‘We are all that’s left of our families.’

‘Darling, it’s far too early in the morning ...’

‘Do you mean for mirroring?’

‘Precisely, precious. You know how unhealthy it is.’

‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ said Ben.

‘Thank you, Ben,’ Lloyd replied. ‘It’s just that for us it’s a trifle more recent than a hundred years. We saw our boys a couple of weeks ago.’

‘But it has been one hundred years since it happened,’ said Eva taking stock of the overall situation, ‘and we must look ahead.’

Lloyd, who read Eva like a book, followed up with,

‘I just have a question about those levitation packs, Ben.’

‘I know the guy who makes them, Lloyd. He’s like my uncle.’

.....

Chapter Sixty-Eight

CARLA

1

They slept the night of *23rd September 2123* huddled in their hiking tents just below the snowline on a grassy patch of level ground. As he was a natural early-riser, Jonesy was first to poke his head into the new morning. Because they were on the west side of the mountain, they wouldn't see the sun for another hour or so. He instinctively glanced around the sky. 'One never knows,' he thought.

They brewed some coffee on a gas cooker and ate energy bars for breakfast. Everyone was keen to get going.

'Five miles, you reckon, down to Pinecrest, Jonesy?'

'That'd be about it, Snake.'

'What a cracking morning,' said Ludwig energetically.

'I would prefer to defrost in a spa, daahling,' said Ivana in her snooty voice.

'I wonder if the shipping container will be there?' wondered DeRongo.

'Did you pack ski poles, Snake?' his girlfriend, Inga, asked.

'Hiking poles, Inga.'

'Ooh, very good. Let us hope that we can find our container.'

'How's the country look to you, Cowboy?'

'I think I got a handle on it, Snake.'

Cowboy led the way down the mountain.

After an hour of traversing rough ground, they spotted a small lake glistening through the ponderosas.

'I doubt that it's Pinecrest,' said Cowboy, 'we ain't come far enough.'

They had reached Leland Reservoir, a small body of water set up as a water supply for the timber towns below. Jonesy had the map memorized.

'I think it's Leland Reservoir,' he said. 'If that's the case, it's three miles to Pinecrest.'

'Through some pretty rough country, I reckon,' added Melvin.

Jonesy's girls giggled. Melvin blushed.

They descended down a steep slope, over rough ground, through a thick forest of young pines. They carried their packs on their backs as they walked,

climbed and slid through the wild terrain. They paused every half mile or so and took a break. Carla, Jonesy's eldest daughter, had been walking with Melvin. They sat together as they rested.

'How did you get the tattoo on the side of your neck, Melvin?'

He smiled, 'It's probably better that I don't remember.'

He looked very handsome to her and not at all old-looking for his 31 years. He seemed like the loner type ... and she loved his bike.

Her younger sisters, sitting next to her, giggled and sang,

'Carla loves Melvin, Carla loves Melvin ...'

Carla turned to her sisters and with a sardonic scowl whispered,

'I'm going to suffocate you in your sleep tonight. You'll think you are drowning. You'll wake up gasping for air.'

The sisters hushed.

'I finished high school this year,' she said to Melvin.

'Been a while for me. Got into Hollywood ... ended up in cinematography.'

'I love your bike,' she said flapping her eyelashes.

'Oooooo ...' giggled the sisters.

'Shut up!' she snarled.

'Desert Ghost,' he replied laconically.

Ace, who sat on the other side of Melvin, muttered,

'No cameras, Melv. Even the phone batteries are runnin down.'

'Yeah, I'll be needin new work.'

'No choppers either. I'll have to get into somethin different meself.'

'I was thinkin about huntin,' said Melvin. 'I once shot camera for a sport-huntin documentary and picked up the inside dope on the tactics and strategy, and the kill shot. Crossbows are pretty good. They're silent, an they even the odds up a bit in favor of the prey.'

They penetrated through the dense forest. Every now and then one of their boots broke through the surface sediment and exposed black charcoal beneath.

'I think that charcoal is the old forest,' said Ludwig. 'I see nothing alive here that's older than about 30 or 40 years.'

'Are you a tree expert, Ludwig?'

'Not so much an expert as an amateur, Dirk. I find it's more about the whole ecosystem than just about the trees.'

They averaged one mile every two hours. There were no trails to follow through the wild terrain, no tracks. The pine forest engulfed them. After six hours of tough cross-country slogging, Cowboy complained,

'Hard to see up ahead through all the trees.'

'It's getting late into the afternoon, Rodg,' said Lauren, his girlfriend. 'Rodg' was an abbreviation for Rodgers, which was Cowboy's surname. Only Lauren Cole, the famous movie star, ever called him 'Rodg.' Everybody else called the equally famous TV actor either Cowboy or Clint, or sometimes Jonesy after the character he portrayed in a series of successful UFO documentaries.

They were now walking towards the western sun although they did not see much of it. Suddenly Cowboy stopped in his tracks and pulled a branch out of the way. The sun shone on his face. He gasped at the vision that had materialized before him. Glistening through the pines, in entrancing tranquility, was a lake of shimmering diamonds. As the group gathered around Cowboy and became spellbound by the beauty of the scene, he whispered,

'I think we've found paradise.'

That night they made camp on a grassy knoll by the bank of the northern shore of Pinecrest Lake. In their minds, the town, the marina and their house were still standing there about a mile due to the south. Looking for the town through his binoculars, across the moonlit lake, Ludwig said,

'You'd think that if there was anyone over there there'd be lights, or at least a fire ... but it's pitch-black.'

'Looks like the town's dead,' said Melvin looking through his own binoculars.

'Does it?' crooned Carla.

'We'll hike down there in the mornin,' said Cowboy. 'Shouldn't take more than a coupla hours.'

2

After another simple breakfast of energy bars and coffee, they set off around the western shore of Pinecrest Lake. It was *Saturday 25th September, 2123*. When

they arrived where the town and marina should have been, they were astonished to find nothing there.

'It must have all got blasted down the mountain,' said Snake. 'This is all freshly-grown forest.'

The crystal-clear water of the lake lapped up against a virgin shore.

'Let's go look up where the house was,' suggested Snake.

They walked in single file through the trees up a gentle slope along the side of a hill. After a couple of hundred yards, Snake stopped and looked around the area.

'This looks about it, what do you reckon, Jonesy?'

'Pretty close, Snake.'

'The house used to be over here,' Snake gestured with his hands, 'and the container ought to be over there,' he pointed into the side of the hill. 'What's that?'

Jonesy walked over toward a small rock that looked 'a bit too geometric'. He reached up to feel it and reported in a raised voice,

'This ain't no rock, Snake, It's smooth metal. It's the container.'

Just at that moment a wave of euphoria swept all seventeen of them. The joy they felt was almost hallucinogenic, '*like trippin on acid*,' Jonesy thought. Finding the container was a huge boost in their prospects. It represented one year's worth of supplies compared to two weeks, 'lugged' on their backs.

They carried eight light-weight, military-style, folding shovels and two handpicks. The tiny projecting corner of the container was on top of a steep bank. They began digging into the side of the hill.

Melvin and Cowboy, who were the youngest men, dug into the piled-up dirt. Carla helped with the shoveling. The boys ripped off their shirts as they warmed up. Carla swooned as she glanced at Melvin's sweaty muscles.

Shovelful by shovelful, the great steel doors of the container emerged from the side of the hill.

'It looks like we packed it away two weeks ago,' said Snake.

Jonesy cleaned the dirt off the stainless lock and said,

'We did pack it away two weeks ago, Snake. You still got the key?'

Snake looked under his shirt and pulled out a key hanging on a gold chain around his neck. He pulled it over his head and handed it over. Jonesy blew into

the lock's keyhole, to clear any dirt still lodged in it, and inserted the key. To his amazement, the key turned easily and the lock sprang open with a click. Everyone went, 'oooooh.'

'Ya get what ya pays for,' said Snake smugly.

Jonesy slipped the lock out and gave it to Snake. He pulled on two levers and unlocked the doors.

'Come, give me a hand with these doors.'

The doors were still partially obstructed by dirt. They cleared it away with the shovels. The men pulled on the heavy steel doors.

'There's some WD-40 inside,' said Snake. 'We'll have to get some on those hinges.'

'We gotta get in there first, Snake,' grumbled Jonesy struggling with a door.

After opening the doors an agonizing couple of inches, Cowboy cut a branch with his hand-axe and cleaned it.

'We can pry it open a bit more with this stick,' he said.

Eventually they had the doors open enough for two people to get inside and push. That accelerated the process. They finally had those doors wide open after about an hour.

It was Snake's honor to be the first to venture into the container. After all, it *was* all his idea and he cleverly utilized the services of an excellent survivalist supply company for the job. The company had ventured deep into advanced, freeze-dried, survival-food research. They also specialized in lightweight and efficient 'primary survival equipment'.

'Survival food and equipment for seventeen people for one year,' was what he ordered. He backed it up with a 50 percent cash deposit into the company bank account. The order was delivered in a truck, which Snake also bought.

Everyone gave Snake a round of applause as he ventured into the open container. His first act was to retrieve his Stetson and place it on his head. He lit a cigar as he explored around the undisturbed interior of the container. He stepped back outside and scanned around the lake. Everyone stood and looked at him in a hushed silence, waiting for him to speak.

'We got water, the lake ... an we got fire, the trees. We got a year's worth of food an there's a nice clearin over by the stream there,' he pointed at a clearing.

'I'm thinkin that maybe we ought to set up camp here an stay a while. The way I see it is that, just at the moment, we don't want to be too far from this container.'

'I reckon Snake's right,' Jonesy agreed. 'This'll make a great base camp, with all the mod cons for the girls,' he smiled at his wife Lori.

'We could undertake exploratory ventures from here,' suggested Ludwig.

'I can't wait to have a bath,' said Ivana in an exasperated voice. 'I feel like I'm beginning to grow fungus.'

'The lake will make a perfect bath, darling,' suggested Ludwig.

3

The tents were unpacked from the container. There was a tent for every subgroup. Snake and Trixie got a comfortable one. Jonesy, his wife and their four daughters got 'the palace'. Dirk and his girlfriend, Inga, Clint Rodgers and his girlfriend, Lauren, Ace and his Italian beauty, Johanna, and Ludwig and his wife, Ivana, all set up their own tents.

Melvin got a tent all to himself because he was a 'sad, beautiful loner who was craving for the flaming love of a passionate young woman.' Those were her thoughts as she lay awake on her side of the bed, while her pesky three little sisters slept peacefully beside her.

'I could do it now,' she thought and chuckled. 'Get rid of the little pests once and for all.' She looked lovingly at their beautiful faces. 'Drat, even devils look cute when they're asleep.'

After they set up the tents, the men gathered stones into a circle for a fire. With axes retrieved from the container, they cut a pile of timber that would last them for days. Some of the ladies went swimming. Snake disappeared deep into the container and, after rummaging around for a while, reappeared holding a square wooden box. They all gathered around him as he informed them that he, 'Got six of these at an auction.'

He opened the box and revealed a huge, eight-inch-diameter, magnifying glass.

'For your stamp collection?' said Ludwig in a humorous voice.

'Much more important than that, compadre.'

Snake stepped down to the fireplace, looked up at the sun and held out the magnifying glass so it focused the sunlight on some dried kindling. The kindling almost immediately caught fire.

'It'll melt lead,' he said smugly.

They placed tiny branches on the burning kindling and brought the fire to life. Snake put the lens back in its box and took it to his tent.

Later, down by the lake, Carla was chastising Melvin for setting up his tent so far from hers.

'Don't like a lot of people around,' he said.

'Well, you should be pretty happy then, because *everybody's dead!*'

He looked across the lake and replied,

'I ain't missin nobody.'

'Didn't you have any family?'

'Nah.'

Her heart went out to him.

'Sorry.'

'Think nothin of it.'

They lay there for a while, staring at the blue sky.

'It's 2123,' she muttered.

'Yeah, I know. And there's people from other planets poppin up.'

'And we are the survivors,' she continued, 'the last hope of the human race.' She turned towards him and added, 'And it's our duty to our species, Melvin, to make children.'

Melvin looked at her and chuckled,

'You've been drinkin too much of your daddy's coffee.'

'I'm allowed to drink coffee if I want.'

The elevation of Pinecrest Lake was a shade over 5500 feet above sea level. They spent the afternoon settling in and organizing their things. They had everything they wanted; the clear, fresh water from the lake, abundant firewood, good shelter and twelve-months supply of food. They dug a deep hole in the ground behind some bushes, away from the camp, and placed a camping-style toilet seat over it. Over that they erected a small tent, which was incorporated in the survival inventory just for that purpose.

4

Carla skipped over to Melvin's tent early in the morning of *Sunday 26th September 2123*. She found him shirtless, down by the lake, washing himself in the water.

'Come over and have a cup of coffee with my daddy, Melvin. He invited you.'

Melvin's wet, muscular torso glistened in the morning light. Carla's heart skipped a beat. She swooned a moment. He smiled and replied,

'Well, seein as he invited me ...'

'We're having porridge.'

He perked up somewhat, 'You don't say?'

First thing that morning, all the men decided to prepare smaller fireplaces in front of their own tents. Melvin already had his own fireplace. After that task was complete, and they were all sitting around their fireplaces having breakfast, Melvin shyly joined the Jones family.

They had known each other, off and on, for ten years, but the relationship had suddenly developed a whole new dimension. Jonesy welcomed him warmly. Lori made him coffee and porridge. After a while, when they were all settled and Jonesy and Melvin got a moment of privacy, Jonesy said,

'Carla's been talkin about you.' He paused and took his time. 'She's only seventeen.' He thought some more. 'We live in strange times, Melvin.'

'I've kind of got a hankerin to go crossbow huntin,' said Melvin.

'Crossbow huntin?' replied Jonesy all interested.

'More coffee, Melvin?' said Lori as she topped up his cup.

'Thank you, ma'am.'

'Hi Melvin,' said Connie, the youngest daughter, who was thirteen.

Melvin lightly patted her on the head and smiled,

'Which one are you?'

'Connie,' she giggled.

'I got six mouths to feed,' said Jonesy. 'Some fresh meat every now and then would sure hit the spot. I might do some huntin meself.'

'I got a real keenness for it, Jonesy, to do it like a sport.' He looked around and said, 'The woods must be crawlin with game.'

'It's like life, Melv, one thing chasin another. ... How old are you?'

'Thirty-one.'

Jonesy ruminated on the answer then grumbled,

'Thirty-one, eh? Well ... you be kind to my daughter, y'hear?'

'Yessir,' Melvin replied cool as James Dean, like he was reading Jonesy's mind. Jonesy pulled a small, red tin from his pocket and opened it.

'Smoke?'

'Don't mind if I do, Jonesy.'

5

It was decided that they would stay in their Pinecrest Lake camp until the alien returned in his space ship. They were relatively comfortable there and not in any particular hurry to go anywhere.

They estimated that a person could venture out for a two-week period carrying all his supplies, except water, on his back. Figuring a conservative ten miles a day, allowing for delays, they estimated that a scout should be able to explore for 50 miles down the mountain, and out into the valley, and then have enough supplies to get back. Jonesy noted,

'After you do the fifty, there's another ninety to the coast. Fifty'll only get you to the valley.'

.....

Chapter Sixty-Nine

BIRTH

1

'We aren't far from the opening,' said Tip excitedly.

'Can't be more than twenty steps,' Fin assessed.

'You girls seem mighty perky after such a long climb.'

Both girls giggled as they hung on a rung on the vertical wall of the mile-deep, black shaft. They had been on the ladder for nineteen hours. They tried to sleep in the slings, but couldn't, so they rested as best as they could. The final two hundred feet were measured by the number of stars that appeared in the ever-increasing silver rectangle of light. Suddenly Griff called out,

'I see the last rung. There are only eight left.'

2

Area-51 was located 80 miles north-north-west of Las Vegas and 445 miles south-east of Green River. The final crater radius from the catastrophic impact of the comet, one hundred years before, was 120 miles. Area 51 and Las Vegas were vaporized in radiant heat, 17,000 times hotter than the sun, minutes before they were blasted out of existence by a 900-mile-per-hour windstorm.

The most destructive thing about the windstorm was the debris it carried within it. Uncountable billions of 900 mph projectiles smashed everything in their path to dust.

A huge earthquake and land tsunami rolled over the ground as if the earth was made of jelly. All three mile-deep shafts should have snapped like twigs, and two of them did, however as incredible as it may seem, one of them, the left one, stayed intact.

If a person with a more faith-based perspective was to explain this miracle, he might have said that it was just God's little reminder to the human race that they couldn't have done it without Him. An individual with a more unhinged disposition might have conjectured that without a shaft there was no story. And who knows? Maybe even for the Almighty it is always about the story, because manifest reality can never be anything else other than a story. Can it?

The melted desert cooled into sheets of glass that cracked in the wild, diurnal temperature variations. As the decades passed, the glassy layer of the desert slowly became covered by fallout and windblown sand. There was no vegetation, as all life, including seeds, was vaporized.

The huge concrete bunker, on the surface, that contained the shafts and lift mechanisms, had been disintegrated out of existence. Like a mysterious, bottomless hole in the middle of a flat, windblown desert, the solitary shaft lurked in ambush, for a hundred years, for an unsuspecting wanderer. One never came.

3

Griffin had his hands on the last rung. The opening now nearly surrounded him. He was overawed by the size of the space they were approaching. He felt gusts of breeze on his face. There were thousands of intense points of light. Five generations of his kin had never seen what he was looking at right at that moment. He looked at the ladder and called out,

‘The last three rungs are missing. It looks like the top of the ladder melted away.’

‘How far is it to the top?’ Fin asked.

‘About three feet,’ he replied. He assessed the situation and suggested that they take, ‘time-out.’

They all clipped onto a rung and rested. They ate a Bar and had a sip of water as they thought about the long climb, their lives, the base, and how they were going to negotiate the final few feet to the surface. Griffin was now bathed in silver starlight. He focused his headlamp on the edge.

‘That looks like solidified, molten glass along the edge there. See the way it cooled? It’s going to be tough getting a handhold.’

‘Maybe I can lift you on my shoulders?’ suggested Fin.

‘You think you can climb with me standing on your shoulders?’

‘Yes ... slowly,’ she confidently replied.

‘I just need a handhold,’ he said.

They hung there for a few more minutes and gazed in wonderment at the firmament above, still having no concept of what awaited them beyond the rim of the shaft.

Griffin's hands were on the last rung, just three feet short of the top. The edge of the shaft opening was vertical concrete fused to solidified glass. The glass beyond the edge was covered by windblown sand. There were no handholds, and the surface was slippery.

Fin climbed up the ladder so her shoulders were level with Griffin's feet. He lifted his left foot off the rung and gently placed it on her left shoulder. He then placed his right foot on her right shoulder. He was still holding onto the top rung.

'How far out can you move your shoulders?' he asked her.

Fin tightened her handgrip on the rung as she adjusted for the weight on her shoulders. She then slowly let herself hang out from the ladder until her arms were outstretched. This brought Griffin's feet far enough out from the wall to allow him to stand without having to hold onto a rung. From now on, Fin would do the climbing for both of them. She understood that if Griffin overbalanced and fell, neither girl could stop his freefall back into the shaft.

She clenched her teeth and gave a mighty lift with her right leg. Griffin released his handhold and lifted precariously toward the top.

'One more, please, Fin,' he said.

Fin strained another lift and hung out as far as she could. Griffin's eyes were now less than a foot from the edge. He could feel a cold wind blowing his hair around. The feeling was completely foreign to him. He sucked in deep lungfuls of the sweetest air he had ever breathed. '*Good filters,*' he thought.

'One more, please, Fin.'

Fin lifted him one more rung.

'I only have two rungs to go, Griff.'

Griffin's head poked into a new space. He was awestruck.

'This is the biggest chamber ... there are no walls ... and I can't make out any ceiling. One more, please, Fin.'

Fin heaved to the second-last rung. Griffin's arms and shoulders rose above the glassy edge.

'It's all glass and sand ... slippery ... nothing to get a hold of. One last one, please, Fin.'

Fin grunted up to the last rung for her handhold. She lifted Griffin to where he was up to his waist out of the hole. He fell forward onto the slippery, sandy

surface. His torso and backpack provided enough weight transference to the surface that he was able to take his weight off Fin's shoulders and pull himself completely out of the shaft.

'Made it!' he yelled in a whisper.

He felt an overpowering urge to look around, but resisted. He immediately dropped his backpack and removed his sling. He uncoiled the rope, tied the karabiner to one end and a few knots along the other. He lowered the karabiner to Fin. She clipped it to the chest-strap of her backpack. He stepped back from the hole and took a strain on the rope.

'OK, Fin,' he called out.

Fin transferred her weight onto the rope.

'You OK up there? How's the foothold?'

'Not the best.'

She let go of the rung and took a step up. The only thing preventing her from toppling one mile into the bowels of the earth was the rope and Griffin, slipping and sliding, on the other end of it.

Another step and her head was out. She quipped,

'You know, Griff, *this* is what being born must feel like.'

One more step onto the top rung and she was out to her waist. He pulled her out the rest of the way. She rose to her feet and hugged him. 'Thanks,' she said. Griffin unclipped the rope from her and let it down the shaft to Tip. She clipped on and was similarly assisted to the surface.

4

For a century, nothing alive had traversed the sandy desert. Then, on one cool night, in secret, with no witnesses, the Earth gave birth to triplets. It was a couple of hours before dawn, on *Thursday 23rd September 2123*.

They moved away from the hole, took off their packs and stretched out on the ground.

'God that feels good,' said Tip resting her head on her pack.

'I could stay horizontal forever,' added Fin.

'How long did we spend on that ladder, Griff?' Tip asked.

'Twenty hours,' came the weary reply.

As they lay there, they felt a slight rumble in the ground.

'Bit of a shaker,' said Griffin. They had experienced earthquakes in the base and were accustomed to them.

As they settled, their minds calmed and they closed their eyes and tuned into the feel and sound of something completely foreign to them. A gentle breeze soon wafted them off into an exhausted sleep.

5

'Don't open your eyes,' exclaimed Griff. 'Do *not* open your eyes!'

The girls were shocked out of their deep sleep.

'Don't open your eyes. The light in this chamber is unbelievable. If you open your eyes everything will glare. You'll need the shades.'

Griffin was talking about the special, dark-tinted lens attachments for their facemask goggles. In the base, the shades were mostly worn for welding and laser work. Griffin and the girls' eyes had never experienced more than the subdued lighting of the base and were thus completely un-adapted to the daylight on the surface.

The girls retrieved their shades and clipped them over the clear lenses. They pulled the masks over their faces and opened their eyes. The first thing they saw was Griffin wearing his shades already. They removed their headlamps, packed them away and pulled out three, black, baseball caps, each of which had a NASA logo embroidered on the front of it. Rip acquired the caps as part-payment for a job well done for a descendant of a NASA astronaut. He saved them 'for the kids.'

It was morning twilight of *Thursday 23rd September 2123*. They had no way of even conceptualizing that. The sun had not yet risen. The light above the mounds in the distance enraptured them. Even with their shades on, they could marvel at the purples and reds and oranges. The whole nothingness was lighting up and the stars were disappearing.

'The stars are fading,' noted Tip.

'Yes,' Fin agreed with her head cocked back.

Suddenly, a blindingly bright point of light appeared on the horizon in the center of the brightness.

'Ahh, don't look at it,' Fin screamed, 'it's blinding.'

'And it burns!' exclaimed Tip.

They all felt the burn on their highly sensitive, totally un-adapted skins. They pulled their hoods over their heads and turned their backs to the rising sun. With all their skin completely covered, they sat on the ground facing west.

'Read the Hail Mary chapter, Griff,' requested Fin.

'The long-shot chapter is what Rip called it.' Griffin pulled RG3s journal out of his pack and flicked through the pages until he came to the one titled, The Hail Mary. He began to read,

'In the unlikely event that you have made it to the surface and are standing beside the shaft, this is for you. It is about navigation across the surface. The bright thing you can't look at is called the sun. It lights up everything. Where it rises, that direction is called east. It will traverse across the big nothing and touch the surface 180 degrees opposite from where it rose. That is called west. That is the way you should go. With the sun at your back at the rise. Everything is not flat like here inside the base. You will see mounds. They are called hills. And just when you thought that you saw the biggest mound there could be, you'll see another one that dwarfs it. They're called mountains. If you walk west, over the hills and mountains, you will come to the ocean. Water as far as the eye can see. All around, whether land or water, where the big nothing meets the surface, this is called the horizon.'

'Water for as far as the eye can see. I can't even imagine that,' expressed Fin.

'I can't imagine anything bigger than our pool,' said Tip.

'So that is east,' said Griffin pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. He then looked straight ahead and asked, 'What is this direction called?'

'West,' answered Fin and Tip in unison.

'Correctomundo,' Griffin replied. Correctomundo was a word RG3 liked to use around the kids and it stuck right through the generations. 'The journal says we head for those mountains over there ... on the horizon.'

The girls were amused by how casually he used all the new words. He looked at them and shrugged his shoulders,

'What? ... It's called the horizon. Haven't you ever heard of a horizon?'

'We'll have to go around *those* mounds,' said Tip. She pointed at the northern extremity of a spine of hills, which lay just to the south-west of their location.

'It's getting warmer,' said Fin. 'We should head off.'

'Let's go,' said Griffin. 'Let's walk an hour and have rest time then.'

They rose to their feet and put their packs on their backs. Griffin helped each girl with her pack.

'Thank you, Griffinickel,' which was one endearing name they used for him sometimes.

'Thanks, Griffi,' which was another.

Both girls hugged him.

They set off headed due west, across the lifeless, featureless, debris-strewn, flat plain, following their long shadows.

They felt a little stiff at the beginning. Gradually, though, their slender, sinewy bodies loosened up and straightened into a purposeful walking gait.

They were tall and leanly muscled. This was due to the 'correct' cocktail of growth hormones in the food bars. All the kids in The Base grew tall and lean, and energy efficient.

6

The Base had a military-only section. Right from the beginning, when it was being secretly constructed, no expense was spared on the scientific laboratories and medical facilities. Everyone was health-checked regularly and progress statistics kept on their condition. All in all, the system was surprisingly benevolent. It tried to keep everyone healthy, both physically and mentally, and have them enjoy a long, productive life, with healthy children.

Part of the research-thrust was into better, more efficient nutrition. The *Food Bar Project* was considered the blue-ribbon research project in the base. The big breakthrough came in 2101, 78 years after the collapse of tunnel one and five years before Griffin's birth. They named it *Energite*, and technically it was not a food, and not a drug either, it was something in-between. It was most 'efficient' in newborns through their mothers' milk and children who were weaned on it. A tiny amount of it provided a huge amount of slow-release energy. Energite allowed them to reduce rations from six bars per day to two bars per day, and everyone felt better. The classified additive called *sponge* had also been included in the bars. This was a self-balancing, water-retention drug, which cut the requirement to drink water by 75 percent. The food bars had evolved to be 98

percent 'burnt up' in the body, substantially reducing latrine visits. Waste minimization, in general, was a primary objective when they began planning the base back in 1947, and human waste minimization was on top of the list.

Although many in the base liked to swim in the pool, there was never any racing. Sport of any kind was prohibited. This was done chiefly as an energy conserving measure. All elevated physical activity needed to be associated with functional work, although they could never stop the kids playing their games.

Part of the daily work routine was riding the generator bikes for two hours. The generator bikes re-charged the batteries powering the base. This, though, was just a token measure compared to the main power supply that came from the nuclear reactor. The ranks liked the bikes because they kept everyone fit.

7

'It's such a biiiiiiiig chamber,' Fin said with a voice full of wonderment.

They walked with an easy, smooth motion with the golden orb directly at their back. Their tough, light-grey, euro-cut, Gore-Tex-Titanium (GTT) overalls shielded their bodies from the burning rays. Their hoods completely covered their heads and the facemasks their faces. They wore dark-grey, GTT gloves and carried a GTT backpack. Their 'shades' allowed them to see without being blinded in the glare.

Their skins were so non-adapted to sunlight that even a few minutes exposure would have induced painful burns. The girls' skins were alabaster in color while Griffin's was light tan due to the African-American ancestry on his grand-grandfather's side.

The Gore-Tex-Titanium making up their apparel was the latest evolution of the miracle fabric. It was foil thin, light, waterproof, it breathed, it stretched, and it was almost indestructible. It could not even be penetrated by a 22-caliber bullet, fired point blank, and could not be cut by scissors or a knife. A suit made of GTT kept its wearer cool in heat and warm in cold. Special laser cutters, sewing machines and thread needed to be used to tailor items out of the fabric. Rip serviced those machines and, over time, traded his services for the three sets of GTT suits, gloves and backpacks.

The suits velcroed in front, from crotch to collar. They wore shorts and T-shirts underneath. For extreme cold they carried lightweight, full-body, thermal underwear in their packs.

They walked west, towards the hills.

'So, this is the surface,' said Fin.

'And all around us is the horizon,' said Tip.

Griffin looked up and said,

'And that is the great blue nothingness. It is ... it is ... incomprehensible.'

'The sky,' said Fin.

'And the great light that shines ... it's so bright ...'

'That is the sun,' said Tip.

After an hour of walking, they stopped. They looked immediately ahead. All they could see was featureless, sandy, rock-strewn, vast plain with patches of exposed glass. The sun was higher in the sky now and was beginning to really bake.

'There is no shelter from the light,' said Fin.

'We could erect our bivouacs,' suggested Tip.

'Good idea,' Griffin agreed.

They dropped their backpacks and opened them. They retrieved a thin, triangular sheet of GTT each, incorporating eyelets, four tent pegs, a length of rope and a light, extendable pole. They placed the sheets on the ground and hammered in the tent pegs with the side of the pick-mattock. They extended the poles and propped up the openings of the bivouacs. There was enough room for them to crawl inside and be out of the sun. They had a sip of water.

'We might be better off travelling in the dark,' said Fin.

'You could be right there,' responded Griffin.

The three half-tents were the only feature on an otherwise featureless plain. With their backs to the sun, they were the only shelter from the glaring big nothing.

The air above the ground began to shimmer in the heat. They sat quietly until finally, one by one, they all lay down and went to sleep.

'Aghhhhh!' exclaimed Griffin shocked from a deep sleep.

The girls woke up.

'The sun, it's moved, it's shining into the tents.'

'We'll have to turn them around,' said Fin.

They had slept all morning like babes. They would have slept right through the afternoon had the sun not woken them. They were really fatigued and some of their muscles ached from the extended exertion on the mile-deep ladder.

They turned their bivouacs around. The sun was still high in the sky and there was just enough shade under the thin, reflective half-tents to give them complete shelter.

It was a brilliant sunny September day in the desert. The sky was cloudless and the wind gusted from many directions. It produced sounds in their ears the like of which they had never heard before. They lay down and drifted back to sleep.

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Chapter Seventy

NEW EARTH

1

Noah flew his ship across the Pacific in less than five minutes. He was very keen to explore the post-apocalyptic planet, but he was keener to see his friends in Noosa. Due to the speed of his departure from Pike's Peak, he only caught the briefest glimpse of the changed geography of the west coast of North America.

He came to a hover about ten miles directly above the east coast of Australia. He paused a moment. Looking south he could see a vicious coastal storm in progress. Beneath him, where Noosa was, the weather appeared sunny with a line of cumulus forming just inland from the coast.

It was mid-morning, *Friday 24th September 2123.*

He made telepathic contact with Thebe.

'Everyone OK?'

'Yes, thank you, Noah,' she replied.

'There is a bit of weather down the coast,' he said. 'We could be looking at a swell in a day or two.'

'That will certainly make Slater happy,' she replied.

'I'm coming down,' he said.

He descended in two long arcs down to just above the water. He glided into Noosa from the east and marveled at its pristine, natural beauty. He could see no sign of civilization. 'That's better,' he thought.

He glided about fifty feet above the small waves breaking across the sandy bar of the river mouth. He flew up-river towards the tents and spaceships, which he saw clustered on a junction of two tributaries. He then spotted the group standing by the water waving to him. His heart filled with gladness and joy. He gave thanks,

'My work is done, I am full of mirth,

I thank the One for planet Earth.'

2

Rama traditions went back for thousands of generations, but nothing went back further than the style of a traditional Rama campsite, called a dom. Their

tents were the shape of tepees and were called wams. These were made of chameleon fabric. Mostly they were white, to reflect sunlight, although they could be any combination of colors. They were held up by ring-shaped gravity sails and were generally arranged in a circle with a larger communal wam in the eastern part of the circle, with the opening facing west, directly into the setting sun. In the center of the dom, the Rama always built a campfire. They traditionally lit it at sunset and they all sat around it in the evenings, singing and exchanging tales, tall and true, well into the night.

The Rama had a variety of gravitationally powered heating and lighting devices, as well as lanterns. The heat and light came from compact, portable friction discs, which spun in opposite directions against each other, rotated by tiny, adjustable, gravity sails. They had lamps in their tents as well as a variety of hotplates for cooking. They liked to sleep on their lev-mats, which were roll-up mats that incorporated a gravity sail. The mats usually levitated a couple of inches above the floor when they slept. It was like sleeping on a cloud.

At night, their tents glowed in soft hues of pastel colors and, on some nights, radiated mystical music into the vast wilderness around them as the Rama sang their songs and played their instruments.

3

'Welcome back to Noosa, Noah,' said Ambriel as she threw herself into his arms.

'Is everyone well?' he asked.

'Yes, thank you, Noah, all are present and accounted for. Thebe, Nancy and Slater arrived about an hour ago.'

Thebe came forward and hugged Noah. 'Well done, Noah,' she said, 'mission accomplished.'

'Yes, mission accomplished ...' he looked around, 'and all seems well.'

The sun was shining and everyone was smiling.

'We have prepared your wam,' said Ambriel.

'You have all prepared an exquisite dom. I cannot describe how beautiful it looked on approach.'

'Adam, Ben, Kane, Adrian, Zeke and I have been here for a week getting everything ready,' said Ambriel. She gestured to the wam at the western point of

the circle, the one traditionally occupied by the most senior Rama in the dom, and said, 'We wish to honor you with the wam of the rising star.' The opening of this wam faced directly towards the sunrise.

Noah, Slater, Thebe and Lucy were the only ones in the group that actually executed the time shift. The rest spent the previous hundred years based on Rama. Kane spent the century with Iapetus, the time master, honing his discipline of higher concentration and learning a broad range of telepathic techniques. As well, they explored swathes of the cosmos and surfed themselves stupid at unimaginably perfect breaks in varying gravitational conditions.

4

That night they all sat around the fire. Some sang songs and some told tales, and it was a most wonderful night, that first night on the new Earth.

There was much laughter and gaiety and the past seemed to be completely forgotten by them all. There was a release, a lowering of pressure, knowing that they had the whole planet virtually to themselves.

Yesterday was gone. There was no yesterday. There was only right now and the dream of tomorrow.

.....

Chapter Seventy-One

WILD FURY

1

Griffin awoke into a much friendlier environment. The burning light was gone. He clambered out of his bivouac and awkwardly stood up. He pulled the hood off his head and the mask off his face and gazed west. His jaw dropped as he marveled at the spectacular palette of rich, glowing colors emblazoning the big nothing above the western horizon. It was just after sunset on *Thursday 23rd September 2123*.

'Girls ...' he called out. He heard the sounds of whining from their little half-tents. 'Come on you two, you've got to see this.'

'It's too early, mommy.'

'Just another minute.'

Griffin laughed, 'Boy you're funny at wake time. You've got to come out and see this. It's absolutely spectacular.'

After a couple more whines, Tip and Fin crawled out from beneath their bivouacs. They stood up, removed their hoods and masks as they looked around, and when they faced west, gasped in awe at the spectacular, desert twilight.

'Oh my God!' they both gasped.

Tip began to cry, 'I never, ever imagined anything so beautiful.'

All three became filled with emotion.

'I wish dad could see this,' said Fin sobbing.

The western horizon was airbrushed in fluorescent yellows, oranges, reds, purples and dark blues fading into a star-encrusted black. However, the most outstandingly striking feature was the white crescent of light floating in the sky just beyond all the colors.

'It must be the moon,' said Griffin. 'You can tell that it's a sphere. See how the unlit side is plainly visible?'

'Yes,' replied the girls in a haunting tone.

'I think that it is being lit by the sun and because it is floating in the great nothing off to one side of us, we mainly see the lit side. The dark side must be being lit by the reflected light from our surface, which is also a sphere ...'

'And is called the Earth,' Fin added.

'Correctomundo, Fin. That's what it says in RG3's journal. And remember how it also says that the moon changes shape from a circle to a crescent and on some nights completely disappears?'

'Yes, I remember,' said Fin.

'Me too,' added Tip.

The line of the horizon was not flat, but hilly. They stood on a high, desert plain at an altitude of about 4500 feet above sea level. The hills directly to the west of them peaked at around 6000 feet above sea level.

'Are those hills or mountains, Griff?' asked Tip.

Griff rubbed his thinly-bearded chin, thought for a while, then replied,

'Well, that depends, Tippy.'

'On what?' both girls asked.

'On whether there's anything bigger on the other side of them. If there ain't, well, then they're mountains.'

They packed away their bivouacs and sat on the ground to have breakfast. They welcomed the evening coolness. Griffin retrieved the compass from his pack and checked their direction.

'We might follow the flatness and veer slightly to the south-west and try to skirt around those mountains,' he suggested pointing at the hills ahead. 'We should try to avoid rough ground as much as possible.'

2

Exactly one hundred years before, to the day, Joey parked her shadow-black, 500-horsepower Raptor at the back of Burger King, just outside the desert town of Tonopah, Nevada, where she had just filled up with gas. All morning she had been towing her pride and joy, and best friend in the whole world, a midnight-black, Quarter-Horse-Stallion named Fury. She got out and opened the back of the matching horse trailer and let the magnificent beast out. Fury stood at a tall seventeen hands. She brought out a bucket and filled it with water from a nearby tap. It was *just after 2.00pm on 23rd September 2023.*

She looked around. There was nothing but desert country everywhere, a valley to the west and a range of hills to the east. She left the stallion un-tethered and free to drink and forage. Fury was the most intelligent horse on the planet at

that time and totally devoted to Joey, his best friend and kindred spirit. She wandered into the restaurant for a meal. A young girl working behind the counter noticed the rig and the horse through the window. She commented,

‘Aasum riiiig.’

‘Thanks,’ came the reply.

‘That your stallion?’

‘Yup.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Fury.’

‘Fury? Get outa here!’ exclaimed the girl behind the counter. ‘Like the horse in the TV show?’

‘Yup, that’s right.’

‘That’s pretty crazy. You won’t believe this, but ma daddy weaned me on that show. What’s your pleasure?’

‘Burger-n-Coke, thank you kindly.’

‘Sho-nuff darlin,’ said the girl. There was no one else in the restaurant. After she brought Joey her meal, she said,

‘You know, sweetie, there’s nuthin but UFO crap on TV, an somethin about a stupid comet. So much bullcacky if you ask me. Most of the time I don’t even bother with the damfool thaing anymow.’

She paused and looked longingly at Joey’s horse munching away at a tuft of grass he found. She then turned back to Joey, who was healthily hoeing into her burger, and suggested,

‘You know, you won’t believe this, but I got a copy of the show right here. I like to watch it when there ain’t nuthin but crap on TV, which is most of the time. You wanna see a bit of it while you’re eatin?’

Joey looked up, surprised, and replied with a mouthful of burger,

‘Sure. I ain’t seen that show in ages.’

The girl grabbed her phone, found the mp4 file of the show and wi-fied it to the TV.

‘I got it on my phone,’ she said all cool like.

While eight billion people watched a live broadcast about a comet, two horse-loving cowgirls watched a show about a magnificent black stallion. It began,

From out of the west, where untamed horses still roam the rugged valleys and canyons, comes Fury, king of the wild stallions. And here, hard riding men still battle the open range for a living. Men like Jim Newton, owner of the Broken Wheel Ranch, and Pete, his top hand, who cut his teeth on a branding iron. Wild as Fury is, there's one human voice he's learned to love and obey ... the voice of the boy who once saved his life, the boy whose unswerving devotion succeeded in taming a savage spirit where spur and lariat failed, Jim Newton's boy, Joey. There's a mutual trust and affection that everyone can understand, the eternal story of a noble creature of the wild and of the boy who loves him, a love that's shared by pint-sized Rodney Jenkins, better known as Pee Wee. But now it's roundup time and there they go, racing over the range, rounding up the wild herds; men, boys and stallion acting as one, a team working and playing together as only real pals can. This is the range country, the last frontier, where men still challenge nature and keep alive the best traditions of the Old West, and where the free spirit of the wide-open spaces is reflected in the nature of the black stallion known as Fury.

The girl looked out the window at the horse. She observed how he raised his head and looked directly up into the sky. The next thing she saw left her disbelieving her eyes. The horse suddenly vanished from view. She just had enough time to say, 'Hey, your horse just disappeared ...' before she completely lost her voice. Her gaze froze to the north as she witnessed the whole universe explode in a burst of intense white light, 17,000 times hotter than the sun. Seconds later, she, Joey, Burger King, Tonopah, and everything else in Nevada, was vaporized to Kingdom Come.

3

As the last vestiges of purple twilight faded into black and the crescent moon hung in the western sky above, Griffin, Fin and Tip set off on their southward trek across the parched, desert valley towards the silhouettes of the hills in the distance.

After about an hour and a half of walking, they observed in awe how the moon had moved in the sky in a westerly direction, following the sun.

'It's properly dark now,' said Griffin, 'just the moon to light our way.'

Moonlight was like daylight to them, a total departure from the total black they experienced underground. They did not feel a need to break out their LED headlamps to light the way for them. Their eyes adjusted to the darkness far better than surface-dwelling human eyes of old could, although the longer they spent on the surface the worse their night vision would become. They would gradually adapt to the daylight, but the process would be slow, taking as long as a year for total acclimatization. They walked on.

4

Fury emptied the bucket of water. After his thirst was thoroughly quenched, he glanced into the restaurant and focused onto his kindred. He could see her in there talking to another human girl. Contented that he knew her whereabouts, he muzzled around the ground looking for a tasty tuft of grass when something caught his eye. It was something in the sky. He looked up at the strange thing, when suddenly, faster than suddenly, the strange thing disappeared before his very eyes. He looked over to his kindred and was shocked to see that she and the restaurant, and everything else, including the truck and his trailer, had mysteriously vanished as well. He whinnied and spun around. The first thing he noticed was that the ground beneath his hooves was more slippery, like glass covered with sand, and it cracked under his shoes. He shook his head side to side and his breathing became stressed. He turned and turned, looking for his precious kindred, but she was nowhere to be seen. He whinnied again and reared up on his hind legs. His right hind leg slipped out from beneath him and he nearly fell over. That caused him to calm down somewhat. Despite all his intelligence, he just couldn't understand what had happened. He thought out to her,

'Hey ... Joey ... where did you go? You have forgotten *me!*'

He more carefully turned on the spot a few times. A less intelligent horse would have allowed himself to become highly distressed by now, and probably panicked, but not Fury. After all, he *was* the smartest horse alive. He looked around at the ground. There was not one tuft of juicy grass, or any other kind of vegetation for as far as the eye could see. When he looked in the direction of the sun, he could see patches of bright reflection of it on the ground, where the sand was blown off the glass.

He had a think. After thinking for a while, he acted. He raised his head and sniffed the air. It was mid-afternoon. He assessed the terrain. He could see nothing but featureless flat plain out to the northwest. He could see that he was on the western slopes of a range of hills that ran from north to south. There was a gap in the hills to the east and another one to the southeast, and there was a big hill due south. He could see flat ground out to the west. It was a valley of sorts and it skirted some distant hills in the south-westerly direction. Everywhere was dry, un-vegetated desert. His ears cocked forward as he focused his instincts on the prevailing elements. He was using his inner compass sensing for the direction home, which was the Broken Wheel Ranch that was located on the outskirts of Bakersfield, California.

He became conflicted by two instincts, to wait for his kindred to return, or to leave and head for home. He scanned the distant horizons in all directions and they were all empty. The only sounds were the light gusts of an arid breeze. There was no sign of kindred. He knew that he had to do something or he would end up dying of thirst where he was. All of a sudden, he locked his gaze onto a hill in the distance, in the southerly direction, and carefully trotted off over the slippery surface.

The glass cracked beneath Fury's hooves as he skillfully traversed the otherworldly landscape. His shiny black coat glistened in the afternoon glare. He sped up into a canter in places where the glassy surface was covered with more windblown sand. He quickly learnt to skirt around the exposed sheets of slippery cracked glass. He aimed through a gap between the big hill to the south and a smaller hill just to the west of it. Once past them, he set off southwest, aiming for a gap between two peaks about five miles away.

As he ran, he veered slightly towards the eastern slopes of the right peak, which, one hundred years before, went by the name of Mount Butte. He wanted to gain some elevation so that he could get a better look at the ground up ahead.

About one hundred feet above the valley, he looked ahead into the distance. There, about 10 miles away, he could see a broad, shimmering white line of a dry bed of a salt lake.

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Chapter Seventy-Two

WATSON'S BAY

1

It was *Wednesday 29th September 2123*. Ben, Lloyd and Eva were returning from a reconnaissance of Warren, the small outback town where Lloyd and Eva used to own a sprawling cotton farm that was being managed by their twin sons, Leon and Russell. They discovered that the farm was destroyed by the impact of a two-mile-wide piece of comet debris. This was promptly followed by a catastrophic flood caused by the whole Pacific Ocean surging clear over the top of the Great Dividing Range, the low mountain range that runs down the whole east coast of Australia. On the east side of it is the narrow, coastal plain. On the west side is the great outback.

After the initial shock of realizing that their sons and their families were gone forever, Eva and Lloyd rapidly refocused on their immediate situation and on the path ahead.

As they sat in Ben's intergalactic cruiser, on the return journey to their camp in Watson's Bay, they chatted about the state of affairs post the global cataclysm.

'We are establishing a settlement in Noosa,' Ben explained. 'Most of us surf, you see, and it's perfect for that there. Also, it is the prettiest of places.'

'We've been to Noosa,' said Lloyd, 'haven't we, darling?'

'Oh yes, Ben, many times. Lloyd loves to drive the Aston up there. He hates flying.'

'That's true,' Lloyd agreed. 'I hate any form of public transport.'

'I think it's a phobia,' she said.

'Well, sweetheart, call it what you like, but I would prefer not to spend the last thirty seconds of my life inside a plummeting sardine can, surrounded by two hundred lunatics screaming, aaaahhh, I don't want to diiiiiie!'

'See what I mean, Ben?'

Ben, who had an amused grin on his face, replied,

'I think that I would have preferred to have done the trip in the opulent luxury of an Aston Martin any day. Who'd want to ride in a tub with a bunch of sweating tourists?'

'There you go, darling, a man of my own heart.'

'You men and your cars ... you are all the same.'

Ben changed the topic.

'I was thinking about inviting my mother to your camp. Would you mind very much?'

'Your mother? Why, not at all,' Eva replied. 'Please invite her. We'd love to meet her.'

'Yes, we'd love to meet her,' Lloyd added.

'How do you intend to invite her?' Eva asked.

'Telepathically,' Ben replied matter-of-factly.

'Oh yes, of course,' she said glancing at Lloyd.

'Her name is Ambriel, but all her friends call her Brie, like the cheese. She is a full-blood Rama. My father is a full-blood Earthling, however, like you, and I am a fully-telepathic, hybrid Earth-born.'

Lloyd and Eva glanced at each other again. They were both highly intelligent academics, so they coped quite well with the mild mind-spin they were experiencing. Lloyd quipped,

'You're not in Kansas anymore, precious.'

'I am beginning to realize that,' she replied.

'I doubt whether Kansas even exists,' said Ben.

2

Immediately upon their return to the Watson's Bay camp, Eva grabbed a bucket and knife and set off towards the rock shelf beyond the western edge of the narrow beach, saying,

'After a hundred years, the rocks should be jam-packed with juicy oysters.'

'I'll come with you,' said Sophia.

The Sydney Rock Oyster, *Saccostrea glomerata*, is an oyster species endemic to Australia. It is found in bays, inlets and sheltered estuaries all around the coast. They are usually found in the intertidal zone to three meters below the low water mark. They are available year-round with peaks from September to March when they are considered to be in prime condition, although some people like the flintier, less salty flavor they have during the winter. They are particularly abundant in Sydney Harbor.

Alex asked Lloyd, 'How was the flight?'

'The flight was incredible, Alex, but the farm was blown out of existence by a two-mile-wide piece of comet. There was nothing left but a huge crater.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Yes, well, it happened a hundred years ago ... so I suppose ... I don't know ...' He sighed deeply. 'I tell you what, though, one thing has become plainly obvious to me.'

'Oh yeah? And what is that?'

'We are totally on our own, Alex, totally on our own. There was no sign of any kind of civilization ... anywhere.'

Adam, who had just come over after speaking with Ben, overheard the last statement made by Lloyd. He joined into the conversation.

'Actually, you are far from alone. You know us, and we know the Rama, and please believe me when I tell you that the future looks decidedly brighter than the past.'

Lloyd and Alex were slightly taken aback by that statement.

'Ben has contacted my wife, Ambriel, and she is coming to join us. She is pure Rama and I am sure that many of the things she will say will lift your spirits substantially.'

'Thank you for that, Adam,' said Lloyd. 'My spirits are lifting already.'

'As are mine,' added Alex.

'We'll have to start thinking about lunch,' Lloyd suggested. 'How long will your wife be? Should we wait for her?'

'She'll be flying down from Noosa. She'll be here by dinner time.'

Half an hour after leaving, Eva and Sophia returned with a bucket full of oysters. As it was around about lunchtime, they all enjoyed a few oysters with some crackers and pickles. After lunch, Eva grabbed two fishing poles and headed off down to the water, faithfully followed by Sophia.

'We can use the oysters for bait,' she said. 'I'd like to see them resist that.'

Sophia was rapidly picking up Eva's addiction to fishing and generally catching anything from or around the water. Also, they genuinely enjoyed one another's company.

3

Ambriel's ship glided into Watson's Bay out of the setting sun. They all stood and watched it park itself next to Ben's ship. She walked down the ramp carrying a walnut cake and a wicker basket full of fruit that was brought over from Rama. Everyone introduced themselves to one another after which they all sat down around the fire on the beach. Alex and Lloyd were astounded by her youthful beauty and natural poise.

'I hope you are hungry,' said Eva. 'We are having linguini marinara.'

'Not to mention the odd glass of bubbly,' added Lloyd as he popped the first bottle. 'This is cause for celebration.'

'How many bottles did you bring, Lloyd?' Adam asked.

'Alas, just a few, but only my best vintages.'

'He would have needed the Queen Mary to bring his whole cellar,' said Alex.

'Wait till you sample our Grange,' added Eva.

Ben attended to the packing and passing around of the Mana pipe.

The two spaceships, levitating silently a foot above the water on the edge of the beach, glowed in a soft, orange light, which subtly pulled everything around them out of the darkness. Mecca was visible floating in the bay, as was the crescent moon with its companion, Venus, hovering in the west above the last vestiges of faint purple light. And as if by magic, as if in a transcendental dream, this whole universe reproduced itself, albeit upside down, in a perfect mirror which occasionally shimmered like liquid mercury.

September nights in Sydney could still require a jumper. They warmed themselves around the fire. Alex momentarily lost himself in a tangent of thought.

'God, if these aren't the three most beautiful women I've ever seen ...' He noticed Ben and Ambriel smile and look at each other.

'Don't let me drink too much,' said Sophia, 'you know what I'm like.'

'Ahh, don't worry, darling, how much trouble could you get yourself into on this beach.'

'I am a very cheap drunk, you know, Ambriel.'

Everyone laughed. Ambriel replied,

'I think Alex is right, Sophia. Tonight feels very special, very special indeed.'

Later in the evening,

'Three families and three ships ... and a whole planet,' said Lloyd in a voice full of uncertainty.

'Perhaps just one family ... and many planets.' Ben replied.

There was a pause. Suddenly, Lloyd rose to his feet with his glass in his hand and announced,

'I would like to propose a toast.' Everyone stood up. 'To the family.'

'To the family,' they all repeated in unison.

After they sat down again, Eva let everyone know that,

'Lloyd loves his toasts. How about another bottle, honey.'

Alex remembered, 'I remember once when, I think that it was pretty late into the night, it was the medicine faculty dinner, Lloyd gave a toast to the cadavers in the anatomy lab.'

Everyone laughed heartily. Lloyd tried to explain,

'I was fairly much under the weather by then and I am surprised that you even heard me from under that table, Alex.'

'Boys, boys, what will our guests think?' Eva pleaded.

'No more bo...boddles for me,' Sophia announced.

Everyone laughed themselves silly. That evening, with the aid of Lloyd's 'bubbly', tomorrow and yesterday were completely forgotten. There also seemed to be no agenda, and no timeline to get it done. It was as if Adam's old quip, *I have nowhere to go and the rest of my life to get there*, had finally manifested into reality.

4

Adam, Ambriel and Ben spent the night sleeping in a tent that Ben brought. They set it up next to the others on the grassy clearing just above the beach.

Next morning, Ambriel awoke to the smell of coffee. As she opened her eyes, she heard the sound of water splashing and the cracking of sticks. She looked out through the tent opening and saw Eva and Sophia swimming in the water and Lloyd breaking twigs and placing them on the fire.

Breakfast was walnut cake, which was generously laced with Mana.

'This is absolutely delicious, Brie,' mumbled Sophia with a mouthful of cake. 'You must give me the recipe.'

'It is a pretty straight walnut cake, Sophia. The only special thing about it is the Mana that I put in it. That, as you know, is for health and longevity.'

'I brought some books that you guys might be interested in,' said Lloyd, 'although I have to go to the boat to get them.'

'Go after breakfast, darling,' Eva suggested.

After breakfast, Adam and Ben expressed a desire to have a closer look at Lloyd's boat. They all jumped in the dinghy and motored over to Mecca. Lloyd tied up to the side and climbed up on deck. He invited them aboard. Once everyone was aboard, he said, 'Look around while I go below and try to find those books.' Lloyd disappeared through the hatch.

'She's a fine vessel,' said Ben.

'Built her myself,' came the reply from deep within the cabin. A few minutes later he reappeared holding about half a dozen picture books, saying, 'Got them.' Noticing Ben and Adam's clear admiration of his boat, he added, 'She's not just pretty, you know, but seaworthy as well. I've had her in a few nasty blows over the years.'

'There are a couple of boat builders on Rama I am good friends with that would love to see your boat, Lloyd. They are total devotees of sailing, although they tend to build and sail Polynesian-style, ocean-going catamarans.'

'You don't know how trippy that sounds, Ben.'

'You don't know how trippy your boat looks, Lloyd.'

Lloyd was taken aback by that statement. In one instant he realized that time and evolution, and unimaginable technology, never changed some fundamental constants, like the wonder and joy of a hand-crafted timber sloop. He realized that it was a fractal constant, like a surfboard, like a singularity. He thought, '*Why did I just think of a surfboard?*' He glanced at Ben. Their eyes met. He experienced a flash where he was flying at infinite speed towards a point, but the point never got any closer. Then he experienced another flash where he flew towards a boundary between black space and white space, a sharp line, and it didn't matter how close to the boundary he got, it never seemed to lose any of its sharpness. '*A fractal constant.*' He understood it all in a fraction of a second. He saw a subtle smile appear on Ben's face. He smiled back, understanding, and said,

'Thank you, Ben.'

5

Back on the beach, Lloyd read out the titles, then passed the books around.

'Wild Food Plants of Australia by Tim Low. Self Sufficiency and Survival Foods by Isabell Shipard. The Bushfood Handbook by Vic Chericoff. This even has a bit in it about the commercial bushfood industry. Bush Tucker by Tim Low. This and Vic Chericoff's are my favourites. Grow Your Own Bushfoods by Keith and Irene Smith. This is the one to have if you want to grow some of the Australian native bush-tucker plants yourself. And last, but not least, Permaculture: A Designer's Manual by Bill Mollison. This is the 'bible' of permaculture, which covers everything that we need to know to thrive in a world without fossil fuels.'

Ambriel, Adam and Ben were visibly impressed.

'We plan to build a greenhouse in Noosa and grow vegetables in it,' said Ambriel. 'We power everything with gravity engines that turn our water pumps and light our lights, but this, this is fantastic, this permaculture, and natural wild foods. In many ways it is what we have on Rama. Much of the food we need grows wild there and we just fly over and pick some.'

'Did dad show you his lev-pack while we were away?' Ben asked.

Alex and Sophia shook their heads.

'No, I never got around to it,' Adam replied.

'You should, dad,' Ben suggested. He then told them a flying story. 'There is a community on Rama that lives completely like wild birds in their levitation suits. They live in tree houses and fly everywhere for their food and whatever else they need. They hardly ever come down to the ground except, I'm told, to go swimming. They mainly live in the tropics, in the ancient rainforests. They are known as the Ilf. They are total vegetarians who live mainly on fruits, nuts, berries, wild herbs and all types of unusual things like flowers and such. To tell you the truth, they are very secretive and mostly what is known about them is on hearsay. Very little is known about them.'

'They have evolved into a strange and mystical breed,' Ambriel continued. 'They are like an extreme version of your hippies that you used to have on this planet. One has to be lucky to spot one because they don't like to be seen. It is said that they are the happiest of all Rama because they basically never work. Their whole lives are like a living fantasy, filled with wonderful adventures. And at

nights, they all get together and sing songs, and tell each other ancient, mystical tales. If you ever find yourself in the rainforest after dark, you will hear it echo with their ethereal harmonies. It is also said that they are the most creative and artistic of all telepaths. Some individuals, who were lucky enough to be told a story by an Ifl, were so enraptured in wonder afterwards that they were unable to find a method to relate the experience to anyone else.'

'I think you were right about Kansas, Lloyd,' said Eva.

'Do you know any Ifl?' Lloyd asked.

'Just one family. They befriended us long ago in order to trade with us.'

'Trade you say?'

'Yes. Our family has been making sails for generations ...'

'Er, that's gravity sails,' Ben butted in.

'And what do the Ifl trade?' Eva asked.

'Fish,' Ambriel and Ben replied in unison.

'Ahh, I love my Barra when I can get it,' said Lloyd.

'Er, not the swimming kind of fish,' Adam explained with a smug smirk on his face, 'the drug kind; no arms, no legs and no brain.'

'Aaaaaaaah,' Lloyd replied as he glanced at Eva, Alex and Sophia.

'It's a very powerful drug used for deep healing and initiations,' added Ambriel. 'We value it highly and the Ifl are the only people we know that know how to make it.'

'It's supposed to be like LSD on steroids,' Adam quipped, 'although I wouldn't know because I've never had any.'

'Nor are you likely to, darling,' added Ambriel. 'The mind expansion that occurs on Fish would literally fry a non-telepath's nervous system and leave him either dead, or a babbling bozo.'

'That is what happens to me after my second glass of champagne,' said Sophia.

6

That afternoon, Adam demonstrated his levitation backpack to the crew of Mecca. He allowed them all to have a go with it. Everyone found it quite easy to adapt to. Lloyd and Alex even flew it across the harbor to the opposite shore and back. Sophia mainly hovered just above ground level around the camp, saying

that she didn't like heights, and Eva surprised everyone by precision-landing on Mecca, picking up a couple of bottles of Penfolds Grange, and returning to the beach.

That evening, after dinner, they all sat around the fire sipping the Grange, all in a highly excited state about flying around in Adam's lev-pack.

'I want one,' said Alex, 'I've just got to have one ...'

'That was one of the most exciting things I've ever done,' Lloyd exclaimed.

'I didn't think it was so exciting,' said Sophia.

Alex laughed, 'It's pretty hard to get Sophia excited. About the only thing that really gets her going is a shoe sale.'

Everyone laughed.

'We know the guy that makes them,' said Ben. 'He's like our best friend and he lives with us.'

'His name is Zeke,' added Adam.

'And this lev-pack thing never runs out of juice?' asked Alex. 'It just keeps lifting forever?'

'Forever,' replied Ben.

7

Later in the evening, as Lloyd popped the fourth bottle of Grange, Sophia, who was a Lebanese Maronite Christian, asked Ambriel,

'Brie, sweetheart, do you believe in God?'

Ambriel thought for a moment, then replied,

'As much as I believe in myself.'

Alex overheard the question and butted in.

'Precious darling, there are only two pitfalls in social intercourse, politics and religion.'

'I agree,' added Lloyd. 'If you want to start a war with someone, just ask them about their ruddy religion.'

'Have you heard of Jesus Christ?' Sophia continued unfazed.

'Can't we talk about something less incendiary,' pleaded Alex.

'Like the Nazis, for example,' suggested Lloyd.

'I don't mind answering,' said Ambriel. '*Everyone* has heard of Jesus Christ.'

Sophia asked,

'Does your God have a name?'

Ambriel smiled and replied,

'A Rama child would never call his father by his name.'

'Do you have churches and religions?'

'No. Each Rama, when they are born, receives a teacher who remains their teacher for life. Each teacher may have many students, but each student only has one teacher. That is how truth is passed from the old to the young amongst my people.'

'Well, darling, Alex observed, we don't have any churches and religions anymore either, because they all went up in smoke a hundred years ago.'

'And good riddance to them all!' exclaimed Lloyd.

'I'll drink to that,' Eva added and held up her glass.

Everyone paused momentarily, glanced at each other, and remembered the millennia of death and carnage in the name of competing religions.

Sophia, who had lost two brothers in a religious war, passionately declared, 'Allah yehereon kulahom.'

Thus, they all toasted the death of organized religion.

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Chapter Seventy-Three

PINECREST

1

Noah timed his return to the North American continent just after breakfast on *Monday 27th September 2123*. He slowed as he approached the West Coast and shook his head with disbelief as he observed the coastline, which now appeared totally foreign to him.

‘The San Andreas must have finally let go when the comet hit,’ he thought. ‘Los Angeles and San Francisco are completely gone! Those must be the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range coming out of the ocean down there. Incredible.’

He noticed hundreds of offshore islands all up and down the coast, which he figured must have been the mountaintops of the old Southern and Northern Coastal Ranges. He suddenly realized,

‘We had thousands of time shifters on the coast of California. They must have all found themselves in the middle of the ocean after the shift.’ He shook his head from side to side, ‘They most likely all drowned.’

He zeroed in on the Pike’s Peak group by telepathically locating Jonesy’s time chip implant. He flew towards them from the south-westerly direction at about one hundred thousand feet above terra firma. His thoughts focused on the group for a moment.

‘There are seventeen survivors. That is really amazing.’

As he looked farther east out over the mountain peaks, some of which were over 14,000 feet high, he became distracted by the 30,000-foot column of smoke rising out of a giant hole in the Earth. The interesting thing about the column of smoke was how it bent 90 degrees to the east as it hit the jet stream. He marveled with amazement at the vast expanse of the impact crater in the distance. Although on the wane, the huge hellhole was still smoking after one hundred years. He re-focused his mind on the task at hand, the survivors. At that point he had no plan. There was no order, or directive, from anyone. There was no strategy. All there had ever been was a decision to allow nature to do her work.

There was a program, based solely on volunteers, to try to rescue some of the Earth's species. The idea for the rescue came as a result of the discovery of the time-shift technology, which was first successfully tested by the revered Iapetus. It was realized that, although not being much use in ordinary everyday life, time shifting would be invaluable in an extinction-level event such as a comet strike.

The other thing about the comet strike on Earth, that was particularly 'interesting' to the Rama, was the fact that it would nicely solve all their visitation problems for them. The main complication had been the over-militarized human population, which was highly over-prone to violence. It meant that the Rama, who just loved to visit Earth for fun, and to 'get stuff', needed to do it in total secrecy in order to avoid a downright irrational reaction by the locals. Even though they took all care to maintain stealth in their visitation activities, they nonetheless spawned a whole underground culture of witnesses, experiencers and researchers into the so-called UFO phenomenon. The military became the most interested, however they were the ones who were most avoided and kept profoundly in the dark. So, it was this unnatural situation as related to the visitation of Earth that stifled any will that might have existed in the Rama to deflect the comet from its trajectory, which, by the way, they could have easily done had they chosen to do so.

2

Noah stopped his forward motion directly above the location of his time shifter. He observed three large lakes in the vicinity of his target's location. One was about fifty miles to the north, one about seventy to the west and one about fifty to the southwest. Although he didn't know their names, 100 years before they used to be called, Lake Tahoe, Walker Lake and Mono Lake. He looked down the line of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and marveled at how they now butted up against the Pacific Ocean. Had he known the names of the towns of a hundred years before he would have known that Sonora, if it still existed, would now have been a beach town on the West Coast. It became very apparent to him that the old coast and the Central Valley of California were gone, forever, replaced by a new, much more interesting coast with hundreds of offshore islands.

He began a gradual descent straight down as he studied the terrain immediately surrounding his target's location.

'Nice country,' he thought. 'I love mountain country.'

As he descended through 50,000 feet, he worked out that the group had moved from where he saw them last, which was on top of Pikes Peak, to a new location about five miles almost due south of there on the shores of a small lake the name of which he didn't know. He thought,

'Boy, that's some rough country between the Peak and the lake.'

As he descended through 30,000 feet, he marveled at the beauty of the place. He veered in an easterly direction as he descended. He wanted to approach from out of the sun and not be noticed until he wanted to be noticed.

The first evidence of the group's camp was the smoke rising from their campfires. Spotting their tents was more difficult because they were made from camouflage material. When he finally discerned the tents, he found himself impressed by the neatness and organization of the whole camp, except for one tent, which was away on its own by the edge of the lake.

'Ha ha, there is always a loner,' he thought.

He silently descended out of the sun then came around in an ark until he finally settled into a hover about five feet above the water, about fifty yards out from the camp over the lake, the elevation of which was about 5,600 feet above sea level. He sat there, observing the camp, and waited for someone to notice him.

3

The morning of *27th September 2123* was as perfect an autumn morning as it is possible to imagine. There was not a cloud in the sky and not as much as a hint of a zephyr. Pinecrest Lake looked like a painting. It was as if God used every color on His palate to paint that tranquil morning, and then some.

Everyone felt well rested after a good night's sleep. The men sat around the main fire drinking coffee and swapping ideas about some kind of plan. The women were mostly about organizing their tents. Carla spent the night with Melvin. Catherine and Connie, Jonesy's two youngest daughters, were chasing butterflies in the bright sunshine down by the lake when one of them, Connie, spotted the shiny silver disc floating silently over the lake not more than fifty yards away. She stopped in her tracks and attempted to speak, but found it

impossible to make the words come out. So she just pointed. Catherine stopped chasing butterflies transfixed by the incredible vision.

It was Ludwig, while sitting around the fire with the group, who first noticed the two girls staring out into the lake. He looked for the thing that had captured their attention and spotted the spaceship. Summoning up all of his refined, calm demeanor, he comically announced the arrival of the extraterrestrial.

'I say chaps,' he said in his fake snooty English accent, 'I believe that we have a visitant.'

Everyone looked out over the lake at the levitating spaceship.

'Holy guacamole,' exclaimed Snake, 'the aliens are back.'

Melvin, who was sitting by his campfire with Carla, and was messing about with a crossbow, rose to his feet and placed the crossbow in his tent upon seeing the spaceship.

'No point lookin un-neighborly,' he muttered to Carla who stepped behind him for protection.

Everyone around the fire stood up and the women called each other out from the tents. Lori called her three youngest girls to her side. Jonesy whispered to Snake,

'She looks pretty compact, Snake. Wouldn't be much more than thirty feet across.'

'Built for speed not comfort,' was Snake's reply.

'Yeah, like my Lambo,' DeRongo quipped.

In the end they all, all seventeen of them, stood like Easter Island statues staring out over the lake at the silent, levitating, polished-silver disc.

At this point in time the disc began to slowly move towards the shore. It made no noise or any other kind of disturbance as it defied gravity over a flawless reflection of itself above the perfect mirror surface of the water. It settled into a hover at the shoreline, glistening in the morning sun while levitating about a foot in the air. Suddenly a panel opened on the underside and a thin ramp, which appeared to be covered in some sort of black, grippy rubber, extended out and downward. It almost, but not quite, touched the ground.

Although the group was used to seeing UFOs from up-close, and even aliens themselves, they were nonetheless rendered into a kind of speechless paralysis

as they witnessed a reality-beyond-fantasy manifest right before their bewildered eyes.

Awe became mixed with surprise as they watched the alien step out of his spaceship. The first impression that struck them was Noah's self-assured demeanor. He didn't look like the sort of guy who ever took too many orders. He was tall, about 6'2", broad across the shoulders and movie-star good looking. All the women's hearts skipped a beat as they all suddenly felt the momentary mindspin of a psychosexual swoon. His skin was either dark or deeply tanned and he wore his sun-bleached-brown hair shoulder length. He wore a ratty-old, multicolored, what looked like hand-knitted, woolen jumper, with holes in it, over a blue T-shirt and a pair of very faded blue jeans with holes in the knees. 'Cool,' Connie whispered to Catherine. He skipped barefoot from the ship's ramp onto the green grass of terra firma, looked at them all, gave them a laconic smile and, in a calm, manly voice, like Chris Hemsworth's, greeted them all with,

'Mornin.'

'Who remembers his name?' whispered Snake.

'It's Noah,' Trixie whispered back.

Just as Trixie said Noah's name, Connie and Catherine let go of their mother and ran over to Noah. Connie smiled said,

'Hello, Noah, I'm Connie and this is Cathy.'

'Come back here you two,' Lori called out.

Noah laughed and said,

'It's OK, I love kids.' He looked down at the girls, 'And may I presume that you are sisters?'

They giggled and each took one of his hands and walked him towards the group. Everyone began to smile. Melvin and Carla walked over from their campfire. They were all together as Snake welcomed Noah to the camp.

'Welcome to our camp, Noah. We're sure glad that you could make it back.'

He stepped forward and put his hand out to shake Noah's. Noah shook his hand and then gave him a friendly pat across the back.

'You have done well, Snake, very well. There are seventeen of you. I can barely believe it.'

'Well, we can all thank Jonesy for that,' Snake replied. 'If it weren't for him, I suspect that we'd all probably be worm food by now.'

Jonesy, who was standing right next to Snake, chipped in with,

'More like charcoal I reckon, Snake.'

Noah put his hand out to shake Jonesy's and said,

'Jonesy, our time shifter, we chose you well. I would not be surprised if you hold the record for most people saved. I would not be surprised at all.'

Jonesy, putting on the old humble act, kicked some dirt and replied,

'Oh, shucks, it weren't nuthin.'

'Why don't you come and sit with us around the fire, Noah, and take a load off,' said Snake, 'and have some coffee. You drink coffee?'

Noah thought about how similar the Earth humans were to the Rama who also loved to sit around their fires. He replied, 'I think that I am addicted to coffee.'

Everyone's faces lit up even more when he said that.

He sat with them and when they were all settled, he said, 'I must learn all of your names and I must get to know you some.'

'Plenty of time for that,' said Snake, 'unless you are in a hurry and need to be someplace else.'

Noah recognized an opportunity to use a line he once picked up from Adam.

'I've got nowhere to go, Snake, and the rest of my life to get there.'

Snake looked deeply into Noah's opal-blue eyes upon hearing that remark. He was a master judge of character, and he recognized a good man when he saw one, but he'd never seen eyes like *that* before. They were intensely iridescent.

'Where was it that you say you come from, Noah?'

Everyone listened intently to the conversation.

'I come from a planet called Rama, Snake, which is located in the Andromeda Galaxy. Rama is identical to Earth, except of course for the geography. It is basically the same size and pretty much the same temperature. The main difference is that we have two suns and two moons, which create slightly less and, occasionally, more well-defined tidal phenomena than here.' Noah noticed some of them looking a bit vague and added, 'but that is a minor thing. Basically, it's the same. Same good air.'

'The Andromeda Galaxy is two million light years away,' said Ludwig.

Noah smiled, 'Give or take.'

'That is unimaginable,' Ludwig continued. 'How do you traverse such distances?'

Noah, who had his back to his ship, pointed over his shoulder with his thumb and said,

'In that. My ship can do the speed of light squared. It takes a tad over an hour to get from there to here.'

'Holy guacamole,' exclaimed Snake. That was one of the phrases he used when there were 'womenfolk' around. Snake didn't like to 'cuss' in front of the 'feminine persuasion and younguns'. He pronounced the nine in feminine like the number 9.

'It takes me that long to get from Venice Beach to Burbank,' said DeRongo.

'Do you have children on your planet,' asked Connie.

'Be quiet,' said Lori, 'the men are talking.'

Noah laughed. He leaned forward and looked warmly into Connie's eyes.

'Oh yes, Connie, Rama is full of children. We live for our children. Our whole planet is a playground for our children. You will love it when you visit one day.'

Connie's eyes lit up with anticipation and wonder at what Noah had just said to her.

Noah sensed the thoughts that flashed through the minds of the adults. He felt their sudden embarrassment and shame at how the people of Earth stole away the precious innocence of their own children by allowing them to be exposed to unrelenting moral degradation. Then he sensed a collective sigh of relief that all the sources of this evil were now dead and long gone. Lori was moved to say,

'That is how we would like our planet to be as well, Noah.'

'I suspect that it shall ... er?'

'Lori, my name is Lori. I am Jonesy's wife.'

'It shall be like that, Lori, if that is how you wish it to be.'

'You want I should top up of your coffee?' Trixie asked.

'An how about a flapjack?' Snake added.

'Don't mind if I do,' said Noah. He looked around at everyone, 'Gosh, I have to learn all your names.'

'Plenty of time for that, Noah, plenty of time for that,' said Snake. 'You just make yourself comfortable first.'

As Noah relaxed, they gradually, one by one, introduced themselves to him.

4

As he sipped his coffee and munched on his flapjack, which was covered in delicious maple syrup, Noah asked,

'It's probably too early to be asking, but I was wondering whether you made any plans yet.'

The men all looked at each other. After a moment, Snake spoke.

'Well, Noah, our first hurdle was to find the shippin container we buried over there a hundred years ago.' He pointed at the container. 'Now that we've found it, it gives us a year's breathin space. We got twelve months supplies stored away ...'

'Plus, we can hunt game for fresh meat,' Melvin cut in. Carla hugged his arm tighter feeling proud of her man.

'That's right, we're pretty well set up for livin off the land. We also got a sizeable seed bank stored away in that container, but we'd wanna be in better growin country to be plantin any of that.'

'Actually,' said Noah, 'that's exactly what I was thinking about. September is autumn up here in the northern hemisphere. It's going to get pretty cold. Had you considered setting up camp down lower off this mountain for the winter? Won't it be in snow up here?'

'He's right,' said Jonesy.

'Actually, we did talk about sendin out a scoutin party down the mountain,' said Snake. 'We figured that they could go fifty miles before they needed to turn back, an that's just livin off the supplies they carried on their backs.'

'That'd get them off the mountain and near to twenty miles out into the valley,' said Ludwig. 'The winters are quite mild down there.'

'They'd be able to find a good campin place for us, I reckon,' said Snake. He then explained the problem as he saw it. 'The main problem, Noah, is the container. Everything we need to live on is in it, and it's up here ... see?'

'Yes, yes, I see,' said Noah now fully understanding the predicament of the group.

Noah put aside his concerns about the group's ability to survive in the short term. If needed, they could be assisted, although he preferred not to interfere too much. He figured that life should be an adventure, which shouldn't be spoiled. He felt that the men and women of the group were capable and resourceful enough to make their own way into the immediate future. He contemplated whether he should tell them about the sinking of the coast of California or whether he should let them find out for themselves. He imagined the high adventure of being the first to discover the Pacific Ocean lapping up against the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Range. In the end he decided to ponder on it for a while before he made up his mind. He figured that he could let them scout out the terrain for themselves and maybe just keep an eye on them. He also knew that sooner or later they would come into contact with other of his fellow Rama and their highly venturesome spirits. He knew that this first twelve months that they had, this twelve-month link with their past through their container, was a highly temporary situation that should not be ruined. Very soon, perhaps too soon, he thought, their lives were going to take a quantum leap into a future none of them could ever have imagined in their wildest dreams or fantasies. Their memories of the past and the container would eventually disappear in the wake of time gone by, completely erased by the adventure of a previously unimaginable, oncoming future.

Noah took a sip of his coffee, looked at Snake and asked him,

'Do you have a Geiger Counter?'

'I got six of em, Noah. I also got a big box of batteries and a couple of decent solar chargers. We're all set up. Why? Are you expectin radiation?'

'There must be, without a doubt, total no-go areas around the place. Although I haven't checked, I suspect that every nuclear power station on Earth has crumbled in a heap and must be avoided, although I think you might be in the clear here, but I doubt that you should send your scouts out without a fully charged Geiger Counter.'

'Got ya,' said Snake.

'You want I should make you another griddle cake, Noah?' said Trixie.

'He might be wantin more coffee as well, cupcakes,' Snake suggested.

'Yes please,' said Noah. 'Er ... now let me try and see how I go remembering all your names. I shall begin with the most important first.' He looked at Connie. Her face beamed into a huge smile. Everyone's face beamed into a huge smile.

'You are Connie and you are the youngest of Jonesy's girls. And how old would you be exactly?'

Connie giggled and looked at her mother.

'Tell him sweetheart,' said Lori.

'I'm nine going on ten, Noah.'

'Nine going on ten ... ahhh, what a wonderful age.'

'How old are you?' Connie asked.

'Don't be rude,' said Lori.

'It's not rude,' said Noah. 'The question actually allows me a segue into a subject that I have been meaning to broach with you all, but I wasn't sure how to go about it.'

'What's segue?' asked Catherine who was sitting next to Connie.

Ludwig, who directed all of their documentaries and understood a segue like he understood a hard edit, said,

'It's an uninterrupted transition from one scene to another unrelated one.'

'I was thinking more like one subject to another,' added Noah. 'Be that as it may, would anyone care to hazard a guess at my age?'

Lauren Cole, Cowboy's girlfriend and famous movie star, always thought that she was a great judge of a person's real age. Her technique was to just look past all the makeup and plastic surgery and see the 'decomposing wreck' underneath. 'I would put you around twenty-eight,' she said confidently.

Noah smiled a modest smile and replied,

'You are very kind, Lauren.' He remembered her name after only being told once. He looked at the others and added, 'Any other guesses?'

Everyone nodded their heads and mumbled and generally agreed with Lauren's assessment.

He suddenly sprang to his feet and said, 'Just a moment, please,' and zipped back to his ship. Almost immediately, he re-emerged carrying a small shoulder bag, made of hemp fiber, and sat back down with them. He put his hand inside and pulled out a small, shiny, intricately-carved, gold container. He placed it on

the ground in front of him and took another sip of his coffee. 'Good coffee,' he said. 'Now, any more guesses about my age?'

Everyone shook their heads wondering at his game.

'OK, I am actually not 28. Er ... I er ... am ... er,' he sighed, '367 years old.'

There were gasps all around and a subtle 'bullshit' could be heard masked under a throat-clearing cough.

Noah laughed because he sensed their skepticism.

'It's true,' he said cheerfully, 'and this is the reason.' He held up the gold container, opened it, and showed them the brown crumble inside. 'It is called Mana, and we partake of it every day. It gives us longevity and well-being.'

Jonesy, who was an expert in such things, said, 'It looks like hash.' Lori gave him a dirty look. Jonesy saw it and said, 'I was just sayin, sweetheart, that it looked like ... you know ...'

'A very astute observation, Jonesy,' said Noah, 'because Mana is made from a plant that is a distant relative to the Cannabis sativa plant that grows on your planet.'

Jonesy looked at Lori in a fashion as if to say, 'See?' She rolled her eyes to the sky as if to say, 'Lord, give me strength.' She didn't like Jonesy partaking of any kind of drugs.

Cowboy, who didn't mind the occasional 'tug on a doobie', asked,

'So, what? Do you smoke it?'

'We smoke it and we cook with it. Our children usually begin smoking it at the age of seven, however it is incorporated into their food much earlier than that. Actually, they receive it from their mothers from birth through their breast milk.'

'And it's supposed to be good?' Lori asked.

'Oh yeah.' Noah replied nodding his head. 'If, for example, any of you partook of it only once, either by smoking it or, say, eating it in, er, say, one of these griddle cakes here, your lifespan would instantly be doubled to about 150 years. If you kept taking it every day, your lifespan would eventually stretch out to eight, even nine hundred years.'

There were gasps of shock all around the camp. Noah continued,

'And you would much more likely live all those years enjoying perfect health. It's amazing stuff.'

'Who do you have to murder to get some?' said DeRongo.

Noah laughed, 'Nobody, Dirk. It grows wild on an uninhabited planet called Mana. As well, all Rama cultivate it in their gardens. We make the crumble in a similar fashion that the Moroccans, on your planet, used to use to make *their* hashish. The best Raman Mana grows on the slopes of Mt. Ourea, our highest mountain. There is no shortage of Mana, Dirk, so no one will need to die.' Noah said the last part with a smile on his face. He continued, 'We can make tea from the leaves and drink it that way. We like to add peppermint leaves to it for flavor and we like it sweetened with wild honey. Mostly, however, we enjoy smoking it.'

'Does it get you high?' Jonesy asked nervously glancing at Lori.

'In its own unique way, yes,' replied Noah. 'It's not like Cannabis. It's different and it's permanent. It makes you feel more, er, it's really hard to describe in words, alive I guess, and that is a real high. The best way to find out is to try it.'

'So, let me get this straight, Noah,' said Snake, 'if I smoke some of your, er...?'

'Mana.'

'That's right. So, if I smoke some, I get to live to be one hundred and fifty years old?'

'That's affirmative, Snake. Longer if you smoke it a second time.'

Snake shook his head and said, 'Holy crap.'

Noah rummaged in his bag and brought out a beautifully ornate, small, white, ceramic pipe. Then he said, 'Anyone care for a puff?'

5

By lunchtime, everyone had had a single inhalation of Mana smoke through Noah's tiny white pipe.

'It's very mild,' was the most common comment.

'I feel all tingly,' said Connie.

They all felt 'all tingly'. The best way they could describe it was that it gave the feeling of being more alive, like when they were a kid.

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Chapter Seventy-Four
HORSE WITH NO NAME

1

After having walked about seventeen miles from their base, they settled down to sleep through the burning glare of the day. Next evening, 25th September 2123, Griffin awoke early. He squinted towards the east being careful not to hurt his eyes in the fading light. He closed his eyes again as he lay on his side quietly and listened for a while to the gentle gusts of the breezes as they wafted around his bivouac. He became transfixed by the surreal moment. He guessed that the girls were still asleep beneath the shelter of their own tiny half-tents. He retrieved his shades from his pack and put them on. Looking through them he admired the way the air shimmered just above the ground. The desert was cooling, but it was still hot.

His thoughts drifted. The base passed through his mind. He still felt a strange presence of it, like someone feels the presence of an amputated arm. At the same time, he felt a new life welling up out of an unfamiliar infinitude. The base was already beginning to seem illusory, a memory from an old life, and he sensed that this memory was going to fade into myth with each passing night.

He sat up, cross-legged, cleared his mind and settled his gaze across the darkening surface into the vastness beyond. He tried to project his focus farther and farther into the third dimension as he absorbed every ounce of information that his senses could perceive.

*And there were plants and rocks and things
and the heat was hot
and the ground was dry
and the air was full of sound*

As his universe painted her oranges, reds and purples across the western sky, his amazement continued to grow as he witnessed, once again, the crescent moon hanging in the nothingness, and the first stars pop into existence seemingly out of nowhere. He wanted to wake the girls so they could see this, but he let them

sleep. He knew they were tired and that they needed the rest. 'Anyway,' he thought, 'pretty soon they'll be calling out for their mommy in their sleep, and I don't want to miss that.' He chuckled at the thought.

Tip and Fin were Griffin's best friends since they were born. They were his kindred spirit. In himself, he felt that he loved them more than even his parents, if that were possible. The twins and he grew up as kids together in the base and their bond was complete. And there were new kinds of feelings. He knew that he loved them both equally. He could not, even for one second, conceive of himself loving one more than the other. As well, as they were growing up and becoming beautiful young girls, he found himself becoming increasingly protective towards them. Like they were his. He also knew that Tip and Fin could never be separated. It was as though they were one spirit sharing two bodies, and to his good fortune, this beautiful spirit was his best friend in all his life.

The girls never competed with one another for his attention. They always, since childhood, shared him equally. And despite the fact that they were still in their mid-teens, they had already, secretly, made a pact to be happy with just one male shared between them. And as things turned out, they got the last living one on Earth. Or so it seemed.

2

Fury suddenly came to a skidding stop kicking up dust and stones around his hooves. He cocked up his ears and looked towards the south. Suddenly he sensed humans. 'Not kindred,' he could tell. They were a long gallop away as best he could surmise. He sensed two of them. He focused directly south in the direction of the humans, then southwest in the direction he was heading before he stopped. He looked south again and, after pounding a hoof and whinnying at the sky, took off in the direction of the human vibration.

3

'Mommy, read me a story,' came a sleepy moan from one bivouac.

'No ... no ... not yet mommy ... it's too early,' came a drowsy whine from the other.

Griffin chuckled to himself and thought, 'Ahhh ... the princesses awaken from their slumber.'

The twilight had now faded into a glowing ember, leaving them immersed in a welcome darkness. He slipped the hood off his head and removed his shades, which he put back in his pack. He gazed in wonder, for a while, at the crescent moon, with its accompanying bright star, floating above the western horizon, and he marveled at the infinity of the star-encrusted firmament before he retrieved his black NASA cap from his pack and placed it backwards on his head.

At first, he squinted across the plain. Then, after allowing them to adjust to the light, he slowly fully opened his eyes. The glare was gone and it didn't hurt to look anymore. The light of the moon made it look like a silvery daylight for him. Every feature on the ground, everything, was visible, and he noticed how everything, including himself, cast its own moonshadow.

After the girls awoke and they all had breakfast and a sip of water, Griffin stood up and looked at the compass.

'We go in that general direction, towards the afterglow. What way would that be then, Fin?'

'That would be west, Griff.'

'And what is that opposite to west, Tip?'

'East, Griff.'

'Correctomundo girlywhirls,' he said in that quirky, self-satisfied, affectionate way he liked to say it. 'I think that we'll have to go around that mountain line there. We'll have to head southwest down this wide valley,' he panned across the valley with his hand, 'until we come to a gap where we can turn west.' The girls agreed. Griffin suggested, 'Maybe we should find a mound to get a better look around from the top.'

'Good idea, Griff,' replied the twins enthusiastically.

They strode over the arid, rock-strewn, sandy ground, which was interspersed with bare patches of solid glass that cracked under their boots as they walked. They immediately took a liking to the cracking sound. It made their steps audible and their six boots tended to naturally tone into a rhythmic beat, almost like making music. They hiked in a line with Griffin leading the way and the girls taking turns at being second. The three of them were tall and lithe, with an abundance of endurance, thanks to the Food Bars. They moved gracefully over the desert, like they were born in it. Griffin paced the traverse. He guided them

through a plethora of obstacles, which he could easily see in the moonlight. He interspersed one hour of walking with ten minutes of resting. After five hours, they stood on a rise about fifty feet above the plain. And even though the moon and its accompanying star had set beyond the western horizon a couple of hours before, up ahead a few miles they could see a large flat area that stood out against the background a much brighter whitish shade.

'I'd say we'll have to cross that, whatever it is,' said Griffin. He took out the binoculars and looked out in the distance. 'There appears to be a gap in the mountains out on the other side of the bright area. I think we should head for that. You girls OK?'

'Fine.'

'No problems, Griff.'

They were now about 30 miles away from the base and they were heading a tad west of south down the middle of a wide, flat valley with about six-hundred-foot-high hills rising up in the distance on both sides.

As they stood on top of the fifty-foot mound, they paused and silenced for a moment, and just soaked in the expansive size of the chamber they were now within. To them it felt like the confines of the base had disintegrated around them, and beyond was this infinity. It was each of their universes that sprouted the idea of infinity in them, just as ours have done in us. It was almost too much for their minds to comprehend, and it might have been were it not for Griffin's inspiring leadership and his one-step-at-a-time approach to forging ahead, which kept the girls tightly focused on the mission.

They chose to break out their green LED headbands to help them light the way ahead.

'There used to be nothing but walls and machines,' said Tip.

'And ceiling. Nothing but ceiling,' added Fin.

'But we are going ... out there!' said Griffin in a voice full of wonder, pointing out across the 'lake of light', which was fluorescing up ahead in the darkness.

'Not a wall in sight,' said Tip.

'Not a ceiling,' added Fin.

'Let's take time out,' said Griffin, 'take a break and recharge. One hour should do us.'

They sat in a line next to each other, with the girls either side of him, and gazed out down the valley. They had a Bar each, and a sip of water. The girls took turns at giving him little hugs to express their affection for him.

After the break they hiked off the mound and traversed the three miles to the lake of light, which mysteriously fluoresced in a bluish-green pastel. They stopped at its edge.

'What is it?' Fin asked.

Griffin stepped out onto the crumbly, glowing surface and squatted down. He picked up a fluorescing grain with his fingers, put it in his mouth and tasted it.

'It's salt,' he said.

They looked out across the billiard-flat lake.

'It's so big,' said Tip.

'We'll take ten and then head out,' said Griffin. He tried looking through his binoculars but put them back down. 'Too dark for these,' he said. 'The moon sure helps to see things.'

'It'll be back tomorrow night, won't it?'

'We can live in hope, Tippy, we can live in hope.'

'How wide is the lake, do you reckon, Griff?'

'Ohh ... I think one hour to an hour and a half to hike over the salt, I reckon. I can give the compass a go.'

'Do it in one hit, I reckon,' said Fin.

'Let that be the plan, then,' responded Griffin.

4

They covered ground easily across the crumbly, flat surface, which induced a pleasant crunch under their boots as they walked. They marveled at the way the salt of the dry lake brightened under the pressure of their boots, which were becoming fluorescing works of art as the salt stuck to them. Griffin used his headlamp to keep an eye on the compass. They left a ruler-straight course of footsteps following Griffin's compass. As they walked, he noticed how the whole celestial dome turned westward relative to the compass. *'Everything is turning,'* he thought to himself.

When they arrived at roughly the middle of the lake of light, Griffin stopped.

'This'd be about half way,' he said.

'Oh God I love breathing this air,' said Fin. 'I just can't get enough of it.'

'Who wants to jog the rest of it, I love this surface,' said Tip defiantly.

Even though they were twins, technically Fin was still the older sister, by one minute. Because she was the youngest, Tip liked to challenge her older sister in tests of endurance and skill, like climbing vertical walls for example, of which there were plenty down in The Base.

'We might stick to walking,' responded Griff remembering Rip's lessons. 'There is no knowing the length and difficulty of this journey. We might be better off avoiding unnecessary exertions and it can't hurt to take rests. Rip was full-on about that.'

They stood there for a moment, there in the center of the lake of light, and marveled. Suddenly Tip whispered with a note of urgency, 'What is that?' She pointed. 'There, like a line, a dark line on the salt, see it?'

'God you have good eyes, Tippy,' whispered Griffin. 'I see it. It's a line of individual things. I count five.'

'Are they moving?' asked Fin.

Griffin aimed his binoculars, 'It's five four-legged creatures. I can see the salt lighting up beneath their feet as they walk.'

'How big are they?' said Tip.

'Hard to tell,' he replied, 'not too big. They're just like a shadow.'

Griffin, Fin and Tip did not understand aggression. That type of behavior breached the directives in the base and nobody practiced it. RG3 omitted mentioning the fact that survival on the surface meant hunting, killing and eating your prey. Nature ate itself in order to stay alive. He ended up thinking it unwise to pollute the journal with such a 'barbaric concept', so he left it out. Everyone was pleasant in the base, if not by nature, then by a carefully balanced cocktail of 'meds'. There was no aggression in the base.

Tip borrowed the binoculars. 'I think they're moving with us ... and they're drifting towards us as best I can tell.'

'They're definitely turning towards us,' Griffin said calmly. 'Let's get our packs on our backs.'

Griffin helped the girls with their packs. They all turned and faced the five creatures approaching them.

They stood in the center of the billiard-flat, three-mile-wide, lake of light, which was the only light visible in an otherwise pitch-black, starlit night. The air was crisp and clear as crystal. The light breeze blew at their backs carrying their scent downwind to a family of coyotes that had time chips implanted under their skin. They were a breeding pair with three, one-year-old pups, two males and a female. The leader male was large for his breed and of a cunning nature. He was chosen for the time-shift program due to his superb hunting ability. He kept his family well fed. The coyotes had no concept of the fact that two days before, they had been time-shifted 100 years into the future. They were attracted to the salt lake because they could see it, and right in the middle of it there was prey, the scent of which they had been following for the last ten miles.

These coyotes knew man and were very wary of him, but they were also exceedingly hungry. They slinked in an arc towards the three humans. The father led the pack with his two male progeny following behind him. The female pup followed them with mum keeping rear guard.

The salt beneath their paws lit up in a brighter bluish glow. The glow of the lake caused the coyotes to instinctively adopt the daytime, open-ground stalking technique. They could see the prey and the prey could see them. The leader's plan was for the three males to encircle the prey while the females stayed back, out of the skirmish. The leader would take the frontal attack. He wanted to get closer and have a proper look at his quarry. As they approached the humans, the coyote males fanned out from one another.

'What are they doing, Griff?'

'They are being very careful with their approach,' he replied. As the coyotes began to encircle them, he suggested, 'why don't we stand with our backs to each other and face out.' They formed a tight, three-sided unit.

Although they weren't thinking about an assault, they were nonetheless well prepared for one with their overalls being impregnable to any type of dog onslaught, and the coyotes could chew on their boots all day if they wanted to and barely leave a mark.

The mother and daughter coyotes stopped about fifty feet out from the humans and watched the three males begin to dart side to side in ever decreasing arcs surrounding the humans. They made very little sound. The leader of the pack

zeroed in on Griffin who was clearly the largest of the three humans. The salt fluoresced a brighter turquoise beneath the dancing paws of the hungry coyotes. They began an instinctive open-ground stalking routine that had been programmed into their DNA over many millennia through the evolutionary process of natural selection.

'Do you think they want to play?' asked Tip.

'Could be, Tippy,' replied Griffin. 'They certainly are going through an elaborate routine there. I can't work out their game. Stay tight, eh.'

'I don't trust them,' said Fin. 'They are acting sneaky.'

The coyotes converged to within twenty feet of the trio. Another ten feet and they would be in the strike zone. They darted side to side and made small thrusts towards the humans, displaying their long, sharp teeth as they did so.

'Are they smiling at us?' Tip asked.

'I am having trouble understanding these creatures,' said Griffin. 'There seems to be something suspicious about them.'

Just as he said that, the big coyote darted in towards Griffin from about ten feet out, nipped his overall just above the ankle, then retreated back about six feet and, while staying kinetic darting from side to side, observed the reaction of his prey. He was looking for fear, but he wasn't seeing any. All he got was a laugh from Griffin.

'Hey, biting not allowed, critter. Mine just had a nip of my suit down near my boot. Stick your boots out if they come for you. They can bite on those all they like.'

The coyote knew that he couldn't kill a large creature with one sudden deadly lunge, especially one that showed no fear. The instinctive technique was to tire the prey, over time, with a sustained thrusting and stalking attack causing the prey to defend itself until it exhausts itself and becomes more vulnerable. The coyote's kill-bite of choice was to the neck where he attempted to choke the creature to death or even puncture the jugular vein.

The coyotes settled into a long-term harassment of the three humans by constantly circling them from only a few feet away and repeatedly darting in and biting, usually at a boot stuck out for defense.

'This is very rough play,' said Griffin. He began to kick at the coyotes and call out to them to 'back off!' The girls did the same. Seeing the apprehension rise in their prey, the coyotes only intensified their attack with fiercer thrusts and bites, accompanied now by snarling and growling.

'Nasty bits of work, these hairy, toothed monstrosities,' commented Fin trying to shake one of the pups off her boot. 'Git away from here!' she hissed.

After fifteen minutes of relentless attack and defense, Griffin came to a conclusion.

'I have a sneaking suspicion that these toothed terrors are trying to wear us down, tire us, in order to have their nasty way with us.'

'They look hungry, Griff,' observed Tip.

'Should we throw them a food bar?' said Fin.

'No way,' responded Griffin. 'The best chance we've got here is if they run out of steam before we do.'

'How long will that take?' asked Tip.

'God knows,' said Griff. God knows was a favorite saying of RG3's and it stuck through the generations.

On the next lunge, Griffin connected solidly with his boot on the coyote's snout, eliciting the first yelp since the encounter began.

'Sorry you nasty thing, but you asked for it,' he said.

The coyote was not the slightest bit put off, though. He was set for an hours-long harassment until his prey submitted out of exhaustion. It was his plan that that night he and his family would feast on the dead carcasses of these weak humans.

Although the tough, GTT overalls were impervious to the coyote's sharp teeth, a well-targeted bite to a shin or knee could still cause bruising through the material. The boots were the best defense the trio had and they now used them continuously as the three coyotes intensified their assault. Griffin also pulled the pick-mattock from the side of his pack. He began to use it to fend off the creature as it unwaveringly persisted to dart towards him and snap at either his boots or lower legs. If the coyote failed to get a hold of something, he backed away and stalked from side to side again, snarling and displaying his impressive dentition, with his eyes firmly locked on Griffin's.

Suddenly, Griffin heard a squeal from Tip. 'Yeoww!' He turned around and saw that one of the other creatures had got a solid hold of her ankle and brought her down. He also saw that Fin was busy with her own coyote fending it off. He swung his pick-mattock and brought it down on Tip's creature's back with the flat of the metal head. He didn't want to injure it. As he did so he turned his back on the pack leader who promptly attacked him from behind. This was the coyotes' ploy. Tip was still down with the creature gnawing at her ankle just above the protection of the boot. He swung again, harder this time, still with the flat of the pick-mattock head, this second blow causing the creature to yelp, let go of its hold, and scamper off to about twenty feet away.

Tip was still down on the salt holding her sore ankle as Griffin realized that he had the crazy, growling, snarling creature hanging off his pack with his long, sharp canines firmly clamped to it. As he turned to face the creature it swung in the air behind him hanging off the backpack.

Almost as if they read each other's minds, Griffin's and Fin's eyes locked for a nanosecond. He threw her the pick-mattock, which she caught by the handle, then turned his back to her with the crazy coyote still swinging free off his backpack.

'Don't injure it,' he said.

Fin swung the pick-mattock across the big coyote's back with enough force to make it yelp loudly and release its hold of the pack. She then attended to the pup harassing her and gave him a solid whack on the head for his troubles. He slinked away with his tail between his legs and joined his father and brother about twenty feet away.

There was a momentary pause in the skirmish during which Griffin attended to Tip while Fin kept an eye on the creatures. He pulled the leg of the suit up to see her injury.

'It's sore eh?' he asked.

'Yeah.'

'It's bruised, and it's going to swell up a bit, but the skin isn't punctured.' He moved her foot to test her ankle.

'Owww.'

'Sorry. Your ankle might swell a bit as well. It's hard to say how much it will affect your walking.'

'I'll be OK,' she said bravely. He assisted her to her feet while Fin made threatening sounds at the coyotes and swung the pick-mattock in their direction. All the coyotes' eyes were firmly fixed on the pick-mattock now. They saw it as the main threat to a successful kill. The leader of the pack instinctively wanted to take it from the humans.

The three male coyotes stood as a group about twenty feet away and felt the throbbing on their backs and head from the blows inflicted by the pick-mattock. Humans were the hardest to bring down because they always came up with some object to defend themselves with. Other animals never posed that problem.

'We best revert to our tight formation when they start to surround us again,' instructed Griff. 'These beasts don't look like they're about to go away anytime soon.'

'I think they are trying to wear us down, Griff,' said Fin.

'I think they want to eat us,' said Tip.

'I think you could both be right,' responded Griff slightly animated. He retrieved the pick-mattock from Fin and prepared himself for the next assault. 'How's the ankle, Tip?' he asked.

'Bit sore,' she replied.

'Here they come again,' said Fin as the three coyote males again began to encircle the trio of humans.

'OK, tighten up, backs to each other,' instructed Griff as they all readied themselves to fend off the threatening creatures.

The leader of the pack immediately noticed how one of the humans was favoring one leg. Instinct, honed through uncountable generations, had him searching out the weakest prey. He swapped with one of his sons and focused his attack on Tip.

'Looks like the big basket is going for you this time, Tippy. Watch out!'

Basket was a polite way of saying bastard. Swearing was frowned upon in the base and was virtually never practiced, especially in front of children. It was Rip who swapped bastard with basket, and everyone knew what he meant, but thought it to be quite hilarious, especially with the way he phrased it. He mainly used the word against cantankerous, broken-down machinery. Rip was, in general, a very funny guy who was loved by everyone in the base.

Suddenly, totally unexpectedly, the leader of the pack sprinted at Tip from twenty feet away and lunged at her sore ankle with which she attempted to fend him off. The coyote managed to get a firm hold of her boot and began to drag her down. She fell to the ground. The coyote was about to go for her neck when he, and everyone else, was distracted by the sound of drumming in the distance. The coyotes, as well as hear it, could feel the subtle drumming vibration beneath their paws. It was coming from the north. The leader of the pack recognized the sound immediately. Everyone stopped for a moment and looked across the featureless lake of light, which was outspread under the black, star-encrusted firmament.

5

Fury galloped at full speed towards the center of the lake of light. It felt to him as if his hooves had wings as they were carried on a surging wave of wrath. He recognized the scene from a great distance having experienced it once before.

Many moons ago, he saved his precious from an attacking pack of coyotes. They had her down and were going for the kill. He fought the leader of the pack and won by stomping him to death. By the time Fury's rage had abated, the coyote's skull was crushed into unrecognizable pulp. The rest of the pack scampered away after seeing the brutal demise of their leader. The memory of the battle with the coyote vermin made Fury's flesh crawl and his hooves pound the crusty, iridescent salt like beating war drums.

His black mane and long tail flew high and his enormous hooves, which were shod with glistening stainless-steel horseshoes, caused the salt to light up beneath their weight.

The big coyote had a good hold of Tip and had her down on the ground, but his single-minded focus was temporarily misdirected by the approaching gallop of the huge stallion. The other coyotes were completely distracted as well, and became disordered and confused.

'What is that?' said Fin.

'I don't know,' said Griffin. 'It looks like an enormous black shadow.'

'It's, like, thundering this way,' Fin observed.

The coyote re-focused on the task at hand and began pulling and gnawing at Tip's boot.

'This overgrown rodent's got my boot,' squealed Tip.

Before Griff and Fin could properly react to Tip's predicament, they, and all the coyotes, were scattered like tenpins by the sliding arrival of black Fury. Iridescent salt flew high in the air around the skidding hooves of the mighty horse and landed all over everyone, lighting them up like Christmas trees.

In the kerfuffle, the leader of the pack released his hold of Tip's boot. She slid herself backwards out of the way as she, and everyone else, watched in amazement as the big coyote and the giant black stallion faced each other down. They all observed with disbelief the coyote lash out at the stallion and the stallion rear up on his hind legs and come down on the coyote's head with his right hoof, killing him instantly. Although Fury still harbored some anger at coyotes in general, for attacking his precious, the anger was now more tempered. Although he felt the urge to pound the dead coyote's head into mush, he resisted the temptation and instead placed himself between the humans and the rest of the pack, reared up on his hind legs and gave them the loudest, angriest whinny that he could muster.

Seeing her mate, and their father, lying lifeless on the salt, and the huge stallion threatening their own lives, the rest of the coyote pack slinked away from the skirmish into the distant darkness. And even though their father, the master hunter, was dead, the family continued to struggle to survive, albeit for only a short while, because their destiny was sealed a century before by the shortsighted, senseless stupidity of the now-defunct human race.

6

Fury stood over the lifeless coyote carcass, breathing heavily, and faced the three humans. His steaming breath could plainly be visible in the cool of the night. He lowered his head in a gesture of friendship. Griffin and Fin helped Tip to her feet.

'Oww, thank you guys,' she whined.

The three of them then stood as one and faced the huge animal.

'I think I know this creature,' said Fin. 'I've seen a drawing in RG3s journal that looked a bit like this. I cannot remember the name of it though.'

Griff wasn't sure what to do next, so he bowed to the horse from his waist and said with genuine sincerity,

'Thank you, thank you so much from all of us, kind creature, for rescuing us from our predicament.'

They were hugely surprised when Fury bowed in return as if he understood, which he did.

'Look at that, it's bowing back. I think this creature understands us,' said Fin with amazement. They were all amazed. But then, Fury was an amazing horse. In fact, he was the most amazing horse on Earth, and that was even before the comet hit. He stepped shyly up to Griff, and as Griff lifted his hand to touch the great creature, Fury muzzled it and sampled the human's scent.

'It's very friendly,' said Fin.

'I doubt whether the overgrown dead rat would agree with you,' replied Griffin.

'It deserved what it got,' said Tip favoring her right leg.

They all began patting the horse and the horse muzzled everyone, and a great friendship began there in the center of the lake of light, a friendship that was destined to last for centuries.

'Take a look at the journal, Griff, and find the drawing,' suggested Fin. 'I know it's there, and there is a name that goes with it.'

Griff was as curious as the twins to find out the name of the black creature that had joined them. He retrieved RG3s journal from his pack, shone his LED headlamp on it and flipped through the pages. He quickly found some drawings.

'This is it, I think,' he said. 'It says underneath here, horse.'

RG3 didn't used to be much of a drawer, but he could draw a pretty good horse because he had been practicing it since he was a small child. It was just one of those coincidental things. And even when he was waiting for a big game with the Redskins, he used to sometimes bury himself in the corner of the locker room and doodle horses to relax. He never drew a dog.

Griff turned to Fury, gently stroked the side of his head and softly said to him,

'Your name is Horse. That is what we will call you.'

Fury tried to roll his eyes, but couldn't. His understanding of the English language was quite comprehensive, for a horse. He never wished more that he could speak. He thought,

'I am *a* horse, two legs.' Two legs, was a kind of derogatory term that he used when he was under-impressed with some humans. 'My name is Fury.'

'The girl with the sore ankle, here,' continued Griff, 'well, her name is Tip. And this girl, who looks just like her, her name is Fin, and me, my name is Griff, and we come from beneath the surface. And *you* ... are Horse.'

It would be a while before anyone uttered Fury's name again.

The twins lovingly patted the huge beast and crooned,

'Hello, Horse.'

'What a lovely big creature you are, Horse.'

Fury, who shall for the time being be referred to as Horse, wasn't minding the attention at all. One would have to be completely catatonic to not absolutely revel in the warm affection of the beautiful twins.

'We should think about pushing on,' said Griff. 'How are you to travel, Tippy?'

'My ankle is sore, but I'm OK, I think.'

As they attempted to move, though, it became clear that she was not OK. Horse knew all about sprained ankles because his precious sustained one once when she fell off him. Griff bent down and gently palpated Tip's ankle through her overall.

'Your ankle is too bruised to walk,' he assessed, 'but we can't stay here, we've got to get out of this light.'

'I'll lean on your shoulder and hop,' said Tip. 'It's only a mile and a half to the other side.'

'Or thereabouts,' added Griff positively.

Suddenly the trio became fixated on Horse who came up to Tip, lowered his head to near the ground before her, bent one knee and lowered himself in an elegant bow. He stayed in that position until they got the message.

'What is he doing?' said Fin.

'Well, it looks to me like he's bowing,' said Griff.

'You know what he reminds me of,' said Tip.

'No, what?' replied both Griff and Fin in unison.

'He reminds me of dad when we were little. Remember how he used to get down on his hands and knees and tell us to hop on his back to ride him.'

'Oh yeah,' said Fin. 'Do you think that's what Horse is trying to do?'

'If it is, that would make Horse pretty smart,' said Griff. 'Why don't you try to get on his back and see what happens.'

'Ooooooh, he is pretty big, Griffy. Why don't *you* get on his back?'

'I'm not the one with the sore ankle, Tippy, otherwise I would.'

'What if he takes off with me on his back?'

'Well, girlywhirl,' replied Griff with one of his dopey looks, 'if he does that, then I suggest that you jump off.'

Fin broke into hysterics. 'Boy you guys are funny sometimes. He won't run away, Tippy. Where is he going to go?' She looked out over the lake of light into the empty darkness beyond. 'He's not leaving us,' she laughed, 'because we are now his friends and he is our friend. I mean, he pretty much saved our lives.'

'Fin is right, Tippy. Try getting on slowly ... and don't startle him.'

Tip knelt down next to Horse's lowered head. She patted him gently and spoke to him in a soft, kind voice.

'What are you trying to tell us, Horse? Are you asking me to sit on your back like daddy did? Can you tell that my ankle is sore? Will you be a nice Horse and not do anything crazy?'

'I don't think he's going to answer you,' said Griff. Tip continued to speak softly.

'You know, you are a beautiful horse, Horse, and so big and strong ...'

'And brave,' added Fin.

'Yes, and brave, who rescued us from those nasty, hairy, big-tooth rat things. And now I am going to sit on your back ... so don't be frightened.'

Tip rose up from her crouch and gingerly lifted her sore ankle over Horse's back and carefully sat on him. When Horse sensed that she was balanced, he stood up.

'Whoah, I'm high!' exclaimed Tip all excited.

'Wow,' is all Griff and Fin could come out with. They had never seen a horse, much less seen someone ride one. It would not have been possible without Horse's high intelligence and his prior experience at being ridden by his precious.

'We ought to push on,' suggested Griff. 'We should try to get to the other side of this salt before the light comes.'

He took his compass from his pack and shined his headlamp on it. 'This way,' he said pointing slightly south of west. 'We'll go for that gap in the mountains up ahead in the distance.'

They saw the silhouettes of the distant hills much better than Horse did. All he could see beyond the lake of light was darkness. They set off. Griff led the way with Horse and Tip behind him and Fin at the rear.

'I'll walk behind Horse, Tippy, just in case you fall off.'

'I'm not going to fall off. I feel quite comfortable up here, except for the rocking.'

As they walked, they began to settle and calm and enjoy again the crunch of the iridescent salt beneath their boots, now with the added rhythmic clip-clops of Horse's hooves. None of them looked back at the dead carcass of the coyote, which now marked the center of the lake of light.

Unbeknownst to the three humans, Horse's thoughts became firmly fixated on finding water because of an ever-increasing thirst.

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Chapter Seventy-Five

THE BUTTERFLY

1

It was just after *2.00am, Thursday 30th September 2123*. Lloyd lay awake in the tent next to Eva listening to the intermittent whistles of the gusting westerly breeze outside. The crescent moon shone just enough light to imbue the gore-tex tent surrounding him with a subtle iridescent glow. He mused at how it looked alive as it ruffled and distorted with the gusts. Embedded within the sound of wind, he could discern the sounds of rustling leaves and even the familiar lapping of chop against Mecca's hull. In the stronger gusts he heard the occasional clank of the halyard against the mast.

He couldn't sleep. His mind wrestled with bizarre thoughts of an uncertain future. He felt an overwhelming responsibility for the survival of his wife and two friends. He allowed these thoughts and feelings to surface at night when everyone was asleep because he couldn't afford that luxury in the day. In the day he needed to be calm and jovial, and full of inspiring confidence, for them.

Within the tent, things almost felt normal. Everything was familiar. The interior, and the exterior sounds, gave no hint to the bizarre reality.

'Dali would have loved this,' he thought. 'How can we be one hundred years in the future? How can everything be gone, dead, replaced by a story of a comet? How can that be? And how does an old university friend from forty ruddy years ago pop up out of a confounded UFO ... out of the blue? ... Give me a break!'

Suddenly a smidgen of doubt crept into his tortured mind.

'Maybe none of it is true. Maybe what is outside this tent has nothing to do with the construct in my mind. Maybe it's all a memory of some kind of wacky dream.'

He sat up and unzipped the opening of the tent. He stuck his head out and took a look. 'Oh no!' he exclaimed, shocked. It woke up Eva. She looked at him from her pillow and asked,

'What are you doing, darling?'

'I'm checking if everything is still real, scrumptious.'

'Oh, how indomitable of you. I'm positively certain that I would prefer not to know.'

Outside the tent, just at the edge of the beach, glowing metallic-gold like two silent Chinese lanterns, were two almond-shaped discs that were magically levitating about a foot off the wind-chopped surface of the bay. Beyond them was Mecca, beautifully rendered out of the background blackness by the moonlight and the glow of the spaceships.

'We are either not hallucinating, love of my life, or we are still hallucinating.'

'That is positively *out...re*, my treasure. Now come back to bed before you cause the universe to roll up like a blind, sprout wings and fly off to ruddy Kookamunga.'

'Splendid idea, joy of my joys.'

2

Later that morning, they all sat around a campfire in the middle of all the tents on the grassy clearing just above the beach of Watson's Bay. There was Lloyd and Eva, Alex and Sophia, Adam and Ambriel, and their son Ben. They finished off the walnut cake for breakfast and washed it down with copious amounts of coffee. They all smoked Mana. Talk eventually turned to the future.

'We are establishing a settlement in Noosa,' said Ambriel. 'It will not be very large, mainly our family and close friends.'

'Why Noosa?' Lloyd asked. 'Why not Sydney Harbor?'

'Because of our penchant for surfing, Lloyd, and Noosa is like a jewel of a surfing place. Have you been there?'

'Yes, we've been there on a number of occasions,' answered Eva. 'Our visits to Noosa were always associated with our love for driving our Aston Martin.'

'Oh yes,' Lloyd sighed, 'we loved that Aston.'

'It had a tan-leather interior, you know, and we had matching Aston Martin luggage to go with it,' Eva added. 'Regrettably it has all dematerialized to Kansas, Lloydie,' she sighed.

'We still have Mecca,' said Lloyd in an optimistic voice.

'And a good thing that you do,' said Ben cheerfully. 'Could you sail her up to Noosa do you think?'

'I imagine so, Ben, although we were never the live-aboard, cruising types. We tended to prefer going away for a week or two, usually timing our passage with the prevailing winds.'

'We love the downwind run,' said Eva.

'Who doesn't?' said Lloyd. 'I have charts of the whole east coast so I think we should be OK despite the fact that there would be no lighthouses or radio beacons.'

'I could guide you through any tricky sections with my ship,' Ben suggested. 'I could be a lighthouse for you.'

'As could I,' added Ambriel.

'Yes, we could keep an eye on you,' said Adam.

'That would certainly help,' said Lloyd, 'although I think that I shall need to break out the sextant and brush up on my celestial navigation as well.'

'So, you are coming up to Noosa to see us then?'

The Mecca crew all smiled at each other because suddenly they had a plan, a good plan. Lloyd turned to Ambriel and confidently declared,

'I believe we are sailing up to Noosa, Ambriel, I believe we are.'

3

As the Noosa trio was preparing to make a departure from Watson's Bay, Adam had a word with Lloyd about an idea he had.

'I have an idea, Lloyd,' he said. 'I believe that you have a rudimentary understanding of how my levpack works. May I assume that?'

'Very rudimentary,' replied Lloyd.

'It's a gravity sail. Well, imagine something like that clamped to the back of your boat pushing it around.'

Lloyd's eyes lit up at the suggestion of quantum-leap technology being applied to his precious timber sloop. Tempering his excitement, he replied,

'That would certainly help with the blasted northeasters we are forced to endure this time of year.'

'Oh mate,' Adam replied in a frustrated tone, 'the mongrel northeasters drive us nuts in Noosa as well. They're worst from now till January. The southeast trades kick in after about February. That's when the points start to really fire, for surfing.'

'I see,' said Lloyd.

Adam pressed on with his idea.

'A simple device, like my friend Zeke tends to design, would suffice, I imagine.'

'It would only need to push the sloop up to her natural hull speed, which is around six knots. It doesn't take much energy to push her to that as she is very sleek.'

'Maybe, before we take off, you and I ought to take some measurements at the stern, and maybe choose some points of attachment. I could take these to Zeke and he could make up a contraption for you.'

'Where is Zeke, exactly?' Lloyd asked.

'Er, he's on Rama, in, er, Andromeda.'

'The galaxy?' Lloyd exclaimed with his voice breaking into falsetto, a rare thing for him.

'Yup,' Adam answered smugly. 'It only takes us an hour to fly there. Barely enough time to get through an album.'

'Andromeda is supposed to be two-million light years away,' Lloyd said completely discombobulated.

'Give or take,' Adam replied being a little too smart for his own good. Ben overheard him and broke up in hysterical laughter. He came over.

'You must excuse my father, Lloyd. I wish you could have seen how completely spun out he was when *he* first experienced Andromeda.'

'But, one hour,' Lloyd repeated.

Ben explained, 'We fly at the speed of a graviton particle, which is the speed of light squared. It is, kind of, our speed limit, *our* natural hull speed if you like.'

'The speed of light squared is supposed to be pure energy,' said Lloyd.

Ben looked deeply into Lloyd's eyes and put him into a momentary trance, saying,

'Are we not pure energy already? And what is gravity?'

The mind expansion Lloyd experienced in that nanosecond is impossible to put into words. Adam interjected,

'Ben, don't go freaking people out.'

'Sorry, father. Are you OK, Lloyd?'

Lloyd replied somewhat vaguely, almost like talking to himself,

'Er, I'm fine, I think. I got this thing about waves becoming matter within perception. Er, like through the senses. I just got this thing ...'

Adam, who understood a little bit about how telepaths conveyed new concepts to non-telepaths, steered the conversation back to working on the idea of having a gravity sail made for Mecca.

'We should choose some attachment points and take some measurements of the stern of your boat, Lloyd, don't you think? We could then make some sketches and I could pass them on to Zeke when I see him next, which should be very soon no doubt.'

'I can take us out to Mecca in the dinghy,' Lloyd suggested restoring his focus. 'I must say, this certainly is extremely exciting stuff.'

'We haven't even scratched the surface, Lloyd,' Adam replied feeling surprised at himself and at how much he already felt part of the new, post-apocalyptic reality.

They motored out in the dinghy and once onboard Lloyd retrieved a pad, a pencil and a measuring tape. They chose the transom as the main support for the gravity sail and the pushpit for secondary attachments. Lloyd, who was quite an artist in his own right, drew up an almost photographic rendition of Mecca's stern. To that he added carefully measured dimensions. When he was finished, he gave the drawing to Ben saying,

'I hope this will do, Ben.'

Ben looked at the drawing and replied, amazed,

'Holy cow, Lloyd, this looks like a da Vinci. We might have to get it framed.'

Both men laughed heartily.

'It's hardly a da Vinci, Ben. You know, I find it difficult to convey to you how exciting all this is for me. I cannot wait to sail my boat with the power of gravity. I certainly hope that your friend, er ...'

'Zeke.'

'Yes, I certainly hope that Zeke doesn't mind building the, er ...'

'Gravity sail.'

'Certainly, er, I hope that he doesn't mind building it for me.'

Ben smiled and said,

'He won't mind, Lloyd. He is a total enthusiast. He lives for these projects. I wouldn't be surprised if he asks to come out for a sail with you.'

'Well, you better tell him that he's very welcome to do that anytime he likes.'

As Ben, Adam and Ambriel prepared to fly back to Noosa, Ben reassured Lloyd that he would return within a couple of days to help with Lloyd's navigation.

4

They watched in awe as the two intergalactic cruisers rose silently in unison to about a thousand feet. From there they saw them shoot northwards like shells out of a cannon, except there was not a decibel of sound. Eva remembered a conversation she had with Ambriel.

'Ambriel reminded me of something before she left,' she said. Alex, Lloyd and Sophia looked at her. 'She told me that the Mana we had smoked and eaten with the cake has extended our life spans to something like 150 years. She then said that we may expect to live for at least 700 years if we continue to smoke it. I believe that I shocked her a little when I told her that we knew the days of our death.'

'Good for you, darling. I'll wager our house that even they don't know that.'

'Big of you wagering the house,' Alex laughed.

'I've already forgotten my death date and please don't anyone remind me,' said Sophia.

'It leaves me wondering what we will do with so much time,' said Eva.

'Yes, especially considering that there are no more shoe sales,' added Sophia. Everyone chuckled. Lloyd looked up into the sky and assessed the weather.

'There are no weather reports we can refer to anymore,' he said studiously. 'All we have to go by is what we can see and our sum total of experience. Noosa is a long sail and there are long stretches devoid of shelter. The most hazardous situation for us would be an easterly gale pushing us against a lee shore. There are thousands of shipwrecks along the east coast of Australia that have succumbed to such conditions. Without weather forecasts we could become sitting ducks out there, so we'll need to be careful.'

'We have lived on this coast all our lives,' said Eva, 'and that should help.'

‘Certainly, certainly, but those east coast lows can spin up literally overnight, with virtually no warning.’

Alex and Sophia, who were not sailors, were actually unable to comprehend the horror of what Lloyd and Eva were discussing. Lloyd took note of the wind direction.

‘It’s blowing from the northwest. If it sticks there and starts to swing west, we’ll get a southerly change by tomorrow. That is what we want.’

That statement engendered a general buzz of excitement. Lloyd continued, ‘The first day of the southerly is usually way too strong, way too wild. The idea is to be ready and as soon as it settles a tad, we weigh anchor and head north. I imagine that our first stop will probably be Pittwater or maybe Port Stephens if the southerly hangs in for a couple of days. We’ll know that it is waning when it starts turning east. That will be when we will need to seek shelter from the days of northeasters to follow. We will wait there for the next southerly. I’ve got to look at the charts.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Alex.

‘We’ll catch lunch while you boys do that,’ said Eva.

5

They had to wait three days for the southerly blow to settle enough for them to be able to set sail from Sydney Harbor. As they were in no particular hurry, they decided to spend the first night sheltered behind the Palm Beach headland in Pittwater. It was *Sunday afternoon, 3rd October 2123*.

They dropped anchor just off the westerly-facing beach and took the dinghy ashore. They set two tents for the expected overnight stay. The girls took a bucket and knives and went hunting for oysters and muscles, while the boys collected firewood and made a campfire. They brought ashore the cooking-ingredients hamper, which contained items such as flour, olive oil, salt, pepper, powdered milk, herbs and such. They also brought two bottles of wine, a jar of pickles, a jar of olives, a chopping board, some utensils and a large, flat skillet.

Alex and Lloyd marveled, as they stood on the beach, at how the golden reflection on the water perfectly linked the setting sun to their campfire.

‘Like the Olympic flame being lit by the sun,’ said Lloyd.

'And here come the goddesses,' said Alex looking up the beach at the girls returning from their oyster hunt. Later, after the girls returned and they all settled down around the fire, Eva pointed at the brimming bucket and said,

'I'm not sure how we are going to eat all these oysters.'

'Life is meant to be a struggle, darling,' quipped Lloyd holding up the wine bottles. 'Red or white?' he asked.

It was Sophia's idea to make Lebanese flat bread.

'It is ridiculously easy to make,' she said, 'with only a minute or two of kneading and no requirement for yeast.'

The bread was soft and pliable and perfect for using as a wrap, stuffed with whatever took one's fancy. It was also a great make-ahead recipe as the dough kept well for around three days.

They all finally settled down and sat around the fire and admired the magical afterglow of the sunset.

'Oh wow,' exclaimed Alex, 'look at the moon.'

Everyone turned around and gasped at the beauty of the near-full moon rising.

'We'll have good light tonight,' said Lloyd.

After they finished their meals, they sat together warming themselves around the fire and sipped their wine. October nights were still quite cool in that part of the world. There were natural pauses in their conversation during which they slid into introspective reflections of their predicament. Occasionally someone would blurt out something completely unrelated to the discussion.

'We are so alone,' Eva sighed.

Everyone threw in their two bits worth after a comment like that.

'Yes, everyone is exceedingly defunct,' said Alex.

'Defunct?' Lloyd chuckled.

'Not everyone,' said Sophia.

'At least there won't be any competition for the oysters,' remarked Eva.

'Oh yes,' said Alex, 'I'd hate to be fighting off a ruddy rabble for the ruddy oysters.'

Everyone looked at Alex then burst out in total hilarity. They hadn't laughed so hard for weeks. When they settled down a bit, Lloyd held up an empty bottle and asked,

'Who's for another one?'

'Certainly, we need to drink to the ruddy defunct,' said Eva holding up her glass. She said it with a tone of melancholy, which everyone recognised as a reference to her two sons who died either nine days or one hundred years before, depending on how one wished to look at it. She picked her spirits up again, though, and announced, 'Another bottle for the ruddy beloved defunct.'

Lloyd and Alex putted out to Mecca and brought back another bottle of Grange.

6

They were up and about at the earliest sign of easterly light, well before dawn. The moon shone with exceptional intensity. It cast its crystalline reflection across Pittwater as it hung lazily above the western horizon. The light of the moon was sufficient for them to see as they packed up and loaded everything in the dinghy. The plan was to leave early and have breakfast on board Mecca.

Just as they were about to weigh anchor, just before the sun cracked the horizon, Sophia spotted a bright star shining intensely in the northern sky.

'Oh my God, look at that,' she exclaimed. 'Is that Jupiter?'

Everyone became distracted from their task and looked at the star.

'It's moving,' said Alex.

'It might be Adam,' said Lloyd. He thought for a moment then added excitedly, 'It might be Adam and Ben with the gravity sail for Mecca.'

'Surely not so soon,' said Eva. 'Those things can't be easy to make and they would have to bring it over from ... er ... I can't believe that I'm saying this, the Andromeda Galaxy.'

They watched in awe as the star smoothly descended in a graceful arc and glided silently across the bay, dimming its light into a soft glow as it did so, and came to a silently-hovering stop right next to the sleek sloop.

It levitated about a foot above the water in perfect silence, ten feet, or so, to the west of Mecca.

They observed as a panel opened in the upper hull. They became completely astonished as they witnessed the crew of the intergalactic cruiser levitate, one by one, out of the hatch, float across the water and gently land on the foredeck of the anchored sloop. There is not so much space on a Compass 28 so they had to land quite close together. There were three of them. Two wore lev-packs while one of them wore a levitating suit, its surface appearing like silver fish scales. The boat crew recognised Adam and Ben, but not the third man who looked 'decidedly scruffy'. Everyone smiled and it was Alex who expounded the first utterance. He looked at the levitating ship and quipped,

'Did you remember to put her into park, Ben?'

Everyone laughed. Ben scratched his head and pulled a screwed-up funny face and replied,

'Come to think of it ...'

Everyone laughed again. The next few minutes were spent introducing everyone to Zeke, who, when he heard about it, got all excited about adapting a gravity sail for Mecca and insisted on coming along for the test sail.

'Looks like we'll be delaying our departure this morning,' said Lloyd.

'Coffee everyone?' Eva offered.

Everyone looked at her and smiled. As the girls disappeared into the cabin to make coffee for everyone, the men had a chat about a variety of topics ending up focussing on the gravity sail for the boat. After coffee, Ben flew back to the spaceship and returned carrying a hessian duffel bag containing the gravity sail. Zeke had the honour of removing it from the bag.

'It's so small,' Lloyd commented surprised.

'It's actually just a sail from a levpack,' Zeke replied. 'It'll give the boat more than enough push. I just modified the back plate to fit the back of the boat accordin to your drawins.'

It only took them a few minutes to attach the gravity sail to the stern of the sloop using special Velcro-like straps.

The gravity sail design, which was originally conjured up by Zeke for the purpose of a flying backpack, and was now slightly modified for the boat, was

genius simplicity itself. The actual principle behind its function was a closely-guarded secret only held by a few families across many galaxies.

There was much speculation about how a material, usually a metal, gained the property of allowing gravitons to pass through it more freely in one direction compared to all other directions, like a one-way mirror that allows light through it in one direction and reflects it in the other.

Although no one could prove anything, and absolutely no one had managed to fabricate the magic material through their own ingenuity, except for the families afore mentioned, theories abounded.

The latest and most popular theory suggested that gravitons, which were so small that they were like light shining on photons, and which travelled at the speed of light squared in all directions equally, and which were electronically neutral, were somehow given a slight charge as they passed through an electron cloud of an atom that resonated at a precise fractal frequency of the graviton itself. It was theorised that the way the vibration frequency of the electron cloud was made non-symmetrical was by the discovery of a material where the arrangement of protons in the nucleus was somehow stabilised in an asymmetrical configuration thus inducing the asymmetry to the electron cloud of the atom. The problem was that this asymmetry was so slight that it was impossible to detect through observation.

It was further theorised that the potential power of the graviton field was so great that it only required immeasurably small asymmetry to achieve useable vectors of directional force. Black holes were the best example of the potential power of the ubiquitous graviton field. The reason this power was generally indiscernible was because it was in perfect balance, all vectors of force balancing each other out.

The understanding on Rama was that the force of gravity was the most powerful physical force in the universe. There was no other physical force greater than it. It was also understood that the gravitational force was the fundamental force underlying the strong and weak nuclear forces.

Thus, by applying a temporary immeasurable charge to gravitons travelling along only one axis through an atom, this caused a slight imbalance in the graviton field and induced a vector of force, a push, in one direction. This push

remained constant and stable because the material, which was a metal with imperceptibly asymmetrical atoms, was stable.

But all this was theory. No one knew for sure and they sure as hell lacked the knowledge to actually manufacture a gravity sail, which was, and is still, the biggest secret in the universe.

In terms of design, the understanding on Rama was that the best design was always a one-piece design, and the best invention was one that erased the steps to its creation.

And that is what the gravity sail was. One piece and no possible way of reverse engineering it. A small number of families possessed the knowledge. The Sailsmiths were one. Albion and Ambriel were their children. Ben was the son of Ambriel, and Zeke was like his uncle and his best friend. Adam was Ambriel's husband and Ben's dad. They were in the *juice* and, for them, everything was possible.

The gravity sail that Zeke designed for levitation, and modified for the boat, was actually comprised of two gravity sails acting on each other from opposite directions. They thus neutralised each other when angled exactly 180 degrees relative to each other. Each individual sail was an eight-inch-per-side, multi-triangular design, for strength, made from a metal that looked like stainless steel. Each triangle had a natural gravitational push, towards one apex, of 412 kilograms. Thus, the two sails combined, when pointed in the same direction in parallel, had a potential of 824 kg of push on the stern of the boat. This was more than enough to sail the sloop at her natural hull speed, which was six knots, and more.

After the gravity sail was fitted to Mecca's stern, they decided to postpone their departure for Queensland. Lloyd was so excited about the 'new mod' to his boat that all he wanted to do was test it around the sheltered waters of Pittwater.

After 'fanging around' the bay for an hour, or so, they 'dropped the pick', next to the parked intergalactic cruiser, in the same place they spent the night. The girls made more coffee for everyone and it was decided that Adam, Ben and Zeke would stay on board for lunch. After the coffee, the girls took the dinghy and a bucket and went searching for seafood. The men stayed on the boat and chinwagged.

The conversation ranged far and wide. Lloyd and Alex were very interested in Rama.

'What is it like?' they asked.

'In many parts one would be hard pressed to know they weren't on Earth,' answered Ben, 'if one discounted the twin suns and moons.'

'The people keep to emselves an live simple,' added Zeke. 'They power their own houses with free energy an make things to trade. Everybody specialises at somethin. There's markets, but there ain't no shops or money on Rama. They just fly wherever they need to go to trade for stuff. There's shops and stuff on other planets, though. There ain't even words for fence an road in the Raman language, which sounds somethin like Latin.'

'Huh,' said Lloyd in a tone both surprised and understanding. 'And you can fly to other galaxies?'

'Yes, Lloyd, at the speed of light squared.'

'Wow,' exclaimed Alex shaking his head.

'Something you will be able to do soon as well,' Ben added.

'You know ...' said Sophia kind of studiously in her own fashion. Everyone looked at her and smiled. 'That gravity thing-me-bob on the back of Mecca looks like a butterfly the way it opens and closes its wings like that.'

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Chapter Seventy-Six
CHINA SYNDROME

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I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.

J. Robert Oppenheimer

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1

It was *Tuesday 28th September 2123*. Noah spent a semi-comfortable night down by the lake in his own, tiny, two-man tent that Snake and Jonesy scrounged up for him from the container. His sleep was shallow and intermittent. He awoke in the middle of the night and crawled out from his tent to have a look around and a think.

The night was painted in blacks and dark blues with patches of lighter blue that were charmed out of the darkness by the silver light of the half-moon. A ghostly zephyr ruffled the surface of the lake and caused it to shimmer like a bed of diamonds. There was almost no sound except for the slightest occasional whisper from the treetops. Completing this Vincentian aesthetic was the warm, reddish afterglow of the dying embers of the campfire. Apart from the ever-present scent of pine, he occasionally, when the breeze wafted his way, got a subtle whiff of smoke from the fireplace.

He thought about this group of survivors and the best way to handle their situation. Mostly, though, he thought about the predicted widespread radioactivity emanating from the hundred-odd melted-down nuclear power plants, 96 percent of which were strategically dispersed all across what used to be the eastern half of the United States of America. The data on their exact locations was programmed into his ship's computer. Although the Rama wanted to architect a scenario that resulted in the shutdown of all the nuclear power plants, prior to the comet strike, they were never able to do so. Their final projections for post-apocalypse Earth predicted limited isolated locations that would remain relatively uncontaminated and habitable.

The Rama cannot remember a time when their spaceships were not fitted out with radiation-measuring instruments. The sensors were embedded in the

hulls of the craft. It is assumed that uncountable millennia before, when they began to traverse interstellar space, the Rama ancient ancestors rapidly realised that there were highly radioactive zones everywhere that needed to be avoided. They thus designed their ships to sense, in real time, the source, nature, intensity and distribution of any radioactivity present in the space they were about to traverse.

So, in summary, Noah was aptly informed about the nuclear power plants' exact whereabouts, and he had a pretty good idea how radioactive the areas around them were after one hundred years. He also had exceptional projected data on the radii of the radiated no-go zones around the meltdowns, as well as the directions of atmospheric currents that carried the radioactive fallout downwind to distant places. He also possessed data on the locations of some, but not all, nuclear waste dumps, as well as nuclear weapons-storage facilities. Many of these were so well hidden that even the Rama could not find them.

Furthermore, Noah understood clearly who was behind the whole nuclear phenomenon on Earth. It wasn't the hapless Earthlings, but the mysterious Dark Ones who dwelt no-one-knew-where and operated in the telepathic realm through their victims, the Earth humans. Through them, the Dark Ones took pleasure in grandiose military strategy and war, preferably nuclear. They also got a great kick out of sexual depravity of every kind, like, for example, the sexual abuse, sacrifice and cannibalism of children, and even babies. Unknown to the Earth humans was the fact that homosexuality was actually a telepathic disease, which became rampant. In fact, the whole LGBTQ sub-group was remotely controlled by the enigmatic Dark Ones. These parasites became the consciousness of their victims, mostly from afar, without their ill-fated hosts ever being aware that they were *possessed* by them. As a note, the Rama only time-chipped Earthlings that remained free of this parasitic affliction.

So, to reiterate, about two years before the comet hit, a Rama nuclear radiation assessment team performed a detailed survey of the number and distribution of nuclear power plants around Earth. They further deduced a projection of global radiation contamination from the 100 percent certain meltdown of all the radioactive cores post the comet strike. From these projections they assigned three short lists of locations where contamination was

(a) within short-term acceptable levels, (b) within medium-term acceptable levels and (c) within indefinite-term acceptable levels. These locations were then programmed into the navigating computer of every Rama ship that sailed to Earth. All this data could be displayed on the spherical holographic display within the ship by it being telepathically willed by the pilot.

As he sat in the moonlight next to the shimmering lake, Noah contemplated the immediate future. He knew what had to happen in order to eradicate the influence of the Dark Ones from this planet. Their hosts had to be exterminated. The comet conveniently took care of that task. All the Rama needed to do now was what they did best. They needed to allow nature to restore herself in her own way and in her own time. With the half-life of Plutonium being 240,000 years, give or take, Noah knew that it would be a while before his people would be able to call Earth their second home.

The Rama were an ancient people. They were wise and patient with extremely long-term plans. He knew that neither he nor his grandchildren's grandchildren would benefit from what he was doing now, but he knew that the lucky generation would come in time, perhaps in a thousand millennia, and they would colonise this beautiful planet and bear their children upon it.

2

Being the early riser, Jonesy was first to emerge into the pre-dawn. His first act was to have a stretch and marvel at the *'mind-blowin'* streaks of vermilion radiating out of the eastern sky. *'The Big Man's gotta be stoned out of his brain this mornin,'* he thought.

Jonesy's LSD years had changed his perceptions quite profoundly. He felt an awareness now, which was acute like that of a wild animal, like a desert coyote.

He had been wrestling with an 'ass-backward' idea for years. It had to do with the perception of his own reality. He deduced that his universe depended on his existence for its own existence. The whole idea manifested itself one night out in the Mojave, under a Brobdingnagian full moon, tripped out of his mind on 'liquid sunshine'. While joining in a howling chorus with distant coyotes, he triggered on the idea that he was an infinite spirit. This was chiefly because he saw himself begin to glow like an incandescent light. In the end he glowed so bright that he caused the whole reality around him to fade in that light. To this day he

doesn't understand what happened, but the idea that germinated in his skunked little brain was as epic as eternity itself.

This thing each one of us perceives as our universe, this reality, this seeming infinity, comes to us through nothing more than five senses, or sensors. What's more, the five signals are converted into electric code, which is transmitted, via nerves, to different parts of the 'spaghetti ball'. This code is then decoded by the spaghetti and converted into our experience. Even light is converted code.

Right in the middle of a passionate coyote howl, in the center of the brilliant light, he saw all that, the nerves and spaghetti, the code, the decoded universe, everything. He saw it all on a spherical movie screen.

The thing that happened next completely blew his mind to smithereens. He experienced himself expanding out, right through the screen and the image upon it. The light emanating from him literally melted the screen away and the universe disappeared. In that moment, the whole universe, including his body, was gone, but he was still there, glowing like a shining star. And what was around him? To this day he has been unable to find words to describe it, even to himself.

At that moment he realized that he was eternal and his universe was not. His body, and its brain and nervous system, wasn't part of him, it was part of his universe. Also, his universe was his alone and no one else's. It was unique. Other people dwelt in their own unique universes. His universe wasn't billions of years old either, it was 45 years old, like his body. All the ancient archaeology, the history, the dinosaur bones, the pyramids, the whole depth-of-time aspect of it, was all baked in, all pre-programmed. It was a perfect, pre-packaged, living, four-dimensional, space-time-hyper-virtual-reality-program with a human body at the center of it. And its mortality was programmed in as well, through the human body. In fact, he now believed that mortality was absolutely unreal. It was something that was invented, along with time, perhaps for no other reason than to make things more interesting, kind of for the adventure.

Imagine being a timeless eternal being having an experience through a space/time program incorporating great new ideas like death and danger. But these phenomena weren't really real, they just seemed real because of the perfection of the program, or construct. And it was all done for the adventure, for the fun of it. And the human body was the link at the center of this construct. It

was the apparent vessel, the apparent container, the apparent receptacle, the apparent temple, the vehicle for him to traverse the virtual space and experience it through the five sensors. It was a temporary home for him, as eternal spirit, to dwell in and be the life of. And it was his light that made it all shine, all of it, the sun, the moon, the stars, the galaxies, everything. And he figured, in his own cockeyed way, that his light, along with the light of every other shining spirit in infinite, eternal existence, was in reality God's light shining through everything from on high, or as he liked to think of it these days, from the great pin-point within which everything existed, probably as nothing more than a mystic dream.

Thus, he couldn't live without God, and his universe couldn't live without him. If God departed from him, he would die. If he departed from his universe, she would die. It was thus that Jonesy's new construct of the foundation of his experience was complete.

He further understood that the way others perceived his whole infinite universe was simply as his physical body-shell. It rendered itself on their mind's spherical screens the same way that their physical bodies, which represented their infinite universes, rendered on the spherical screen of his mind. And the construct of all the universes was very similar, but not the same, because each one of us lives in our own private universe, which is incontrovertibly unique.

He had heard some people suggest that the universe was a hologram, a well-crafted illusion. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. The thing he understood though was, hologram or not, the universe was his alone and no one else's. Just because it matched, nearly perfectly, other people's universes, did not mean that we all somehow dwelt in the same one great big, consensus universe, the idea of which he decisively 'nailed to the counter'. And just because it looked like it was millions of years old, it didn't mean that it was, it just meant that it looked like it was.

And the magic trigger for Jonesy's grandiose, ass-backward way of looking at reality was the mind-expanding, spell-working power of Lysergic acid diethylamide.

3

Jonesy stirred some still-glowing embers to the surface with a stick and re-kindled the campfire. He immediately set to the task of brewing up a pot of coffee.

As it turned out, Noah was the first to join him. Everything was becoming visible in the golden light of the pre-dawn.

'You certainly are an early riser, Jonesy,' commented Noah.

'Never been one for lyin in bed with me eyes open, Noah. You're up pretty early as well. Sleep OK?'

'Thank you, yes,' Noah replied not giving away his nocturnal concerns.

'I'll never come to terms with lookin at your ship floatin there like that,' said Jonesy glancing at the silently-levitating intergalactic cruiser.

Snake and Ludwig were next to rise. They both ventured down to the lake where they washed and brushed their teeth. They finally sat next to the other two around the fire.

'Cracking morning, chaps,' said Ludwig in his phony British accent while pulling his beany down over his ears.

'That Arbuckle's hot yet, Jonesy?' said Snake warming his hands over the fire.

'Hot as a hoe house on nickel night,' replied Jonesy with a laconic drawl.

Snake turned to Noah. 'Sleep OK in that tent, Noah?' he asked him.

'Like a log,' Noah lied. He took a sip of his coffee. 'Fine coffee, Jonesy,' he said. He looked at the sunrise. 'We have two suns on Rama,' he commented, 'although most everything else is the same as here.' Noah was making casual conversation but he was thinking about Geiger counters. 'Actually, I lied about how I slept,' he finally confessed.

The other three looked at him strangely. A man didn't usually 'fess up to bendin the truth'. Noah continued,

'Thoughts about all those nuclear power plants around your country melting down kept waking me up. I must confess that I'm concerned about great swaths of the North American continent being potentially too radioactive for habitation.'

'Holy crap!' exclaimed Snake. He thought for a moment then added, 'The survivalist people packed a bunch of maps in the container. There might be one with the power plants marked on it. I might go look for it in a minute.'

'While you're there, Snake, you might wanna grab one of them there Geiger counters,' suggested Jonesy.

'Yes, I was thinking that,' said Noah. 'It couldn't hurt to measure the latent radiation around the camp here.'

'You boys must be readin my mind,' said Snake.

Noah already knew that the area around Pikes Peak was designated type (b), medium-term acceptable radiation levels. It allowed them about twelve months in that location. He would have never set foot on the ground if it had been worse. The survey and subsequent projections, carried out a century before, marked out the future safe zones. That was the reason Noah told Thebe to tell Jonesy to be on top of Pikes Peak at the time of the comet strike.

Pikes Peak was exactly 215 miles from the nearest nuclear power plant, which was the Diablo Canyon Power Plant at Avilla Beach California. To further add to the safety from this nuclear disaster, the plant was now more than likely under water due to the sinking of the California coast. Projections, made a century before, predicted that substantial parts of northern California should remain relatively free of radioactive fallout. Noah knew, though, that projections could be wrong and that a real-time ground survey was necessary to detail-map-out the area the survivors hoped to live in.

4

One hour later, the Pinecrest camp was a hive of breakfast activity.

'Daaaahling,' exclaimed Ivana with a guttural passion, 'I would exchange my shirt for an almond croissant right now.'

'As long as it isn't your underwear, my love,' replied Ludwig, her husband. Everyone chuckled politely and held their collective tongues.

'Canned bacon's OK,' said Snake admiring the empty can.

'And you'd never know the powdered eggs ain't real,' added Trixie.

'My favorite is the pancake mix,' said Lori, Jonesy's wife. 'It's the girls' favorite.'

Everyone was happy munching breakfast around their own campfires. Snake, Jonesy, Ludwig and Noah sat around the main fire. Snake rose to his feet and said,

'I might go and look for that map and Geiger counter.'

'Capital idea,' said Ludwig.

While Snake was rummaging inside the container, Noah spoke to the others about the information he possessed regarding potential radiation zones.

'I must remind you,' he emphasized, 'that what we have are just speculative projections from a century ago, so they will not be absolutely error-free. The only way we can ascertain accurate data is to survey the ground ourselves.'

'That's a lot of walkin,' said Jonesy.

'Yes, I agree, it would be if we had to walk,' replied Noah, 'but we don't. I haven't told you this yet, but my ship has radiation detectors embedded in the hull. I can summon up a readout on my display.'

'So you, like, got a Geiger counter built into your ship?'

'Yes, Jonesy, precisely. We Rama need to monitor radiation sources, intensities and types wherever we go. Interplanetary space is an exceedingly hostile environment and one does not want to spend any more time in it than one has to. We always aim to traverse open space as quickly as possible and find shelter behind a suitable magnetosphere, like, for example, the one that surrounds this planet.'

'It shields us from cosmic rays,' Ludwig contributed.

'That is affirmative, Ludwig,' said Noah. He continued. 'So, at some stage I should undertake a quick reconnaissance of the surrounding area and map it out for radioactivity. I can take one person with me, there is enough room in my ship for that.'

Everyone's ears pricked up. Suddenly there was an air of excitement around the fire. The thought of getting a ride in an alien spaceship had been a top fantasy in all the men's minds, and even in some of the women's, for years. It went right back to when they witnessed their first UFO.

Around about then, Snake returned from the container carrying a map and a Geiger counter.

'Found em,' he said as he sat down between Noah and Jonesy.

Snake spread out a map of the USA. They began to study its details. Ludwig asked if he could look at the Geiger counter that came in a small, metal box. A quite comprehensive instruction manual was included with it.

'This map's got all the power plants marked on,' said Snake with an almost surprised sounding voice. 'It says up here that there are 104 of em. And check this

out, most of em are east of the Missisip. There's two in California and one in Arizona. There's a number next to each one, an here down the right side is all their names.' He was sounding astounded. He continued sounding completely blown away. 'I never realized how many nucular plants we actually had. Never even thought about it.' He looked at Noah and asked him, 'An you reckon that they're all melted down?'

'Have to be.' Noah replied almost too casually.

'Like in that ol movie, China Syndrome?' said Jonesy.

'Yes indeed,' replied Noah.

'What? You seen it then?'

'Certainly, I have. We have all your movies. I believe that the idea, for the China Syndrome screenplay, was actually implanted into the director James Bridges' mind by us, er, way back in the early seventies. Of course, he had no idea where it came from,' Noah smirked a little, 'but we did.'

'Holy guacamole,' exclaimed Snake.

'I'll second that,' said Ludwig looking up from the instruction manual for the Geiger counter. 'By the way, this measuring of radioactivity becomes quite complicated when you get into it.'

The others all looked at him.

'Let me read you just the basics,' he suggested. 'OK. There are four different, but interrelated, units for measuring radioactivity. Exposure, absorbed dose, dose equivalent ...' He stopped reading, looked up from the page, closed his eyes, tilted his head back and breathed in deeply. He appeared to the others to be focusing on something within. After a moment's pause, for effect, he announced to everyone in a very proper English accent, 'I do believe that I shaln't be needing my prune juice this morning.' After the chuckles subsided, he continued. 'Radioactivity refers to the amount of ionizing radiation released by a material. Whether it emits alpha or beta particles, gamma rays, x-rays, or neutrons, a quantity of radioactive material is expressed in terms of its radioactivity, or simply its activity, which represents how many atoms in the material decay in a given time period. The units of measure for radioactivity are the British curie and the international metric becquerel.' He looked up from the manual and asked, 'How is everyone going?'

'Jesus Christ,' said Snake, 'do we need to know all this crap?'

'I believe,' said Noah very calmly, 'that your very lives may depend on it. You now live on what could generally be described as a hot planet. The trick to surviving, and thriving, in such an environment is to avoid the hot zones and hang out in the cool ones.'

Snake and Jonesy's jaws began to hang limp.

'Shall I continue?' Ludwig asked.

The others nodded their heads.

'OK, er, exposure describes the amount of radiation traveling through the air. Many radiation monitors measure exposure. The units for exposure are the roentgen and coulomb/kilogram. I imagine those are British and metric again but it doesn't say. Er, absorbed dose describes the amount of radiation absorbed by an object or person, that is, the amount of energy that radioactive sources deposit in materials through which they pass. The units for absorbed dose are the radiation absorbed dose, or rad, and the gray.

'Er, it goes on here to say that the dose equivalent, or effective dose, combines the amount of radiation absorbed and the medical effects of that type of radiation. This is measured in sieverts.' Ludwig paused for a moment and read on silently. He then exclaimed, 'My God this gets complicated. There are so many ways of measuring ...'

Noah offered a simplified version.

'I think basically it's the type of radiation and how much of it penetrates into the body. Also, different parts of the body are more susceptible than others. The worst thing is when a radioactive substance is ingested into the body by either breathing or swallowing. That is usually fatal.'

'OK, I found another part here,' said Ludwig flipping through the manual. He read, 'There are three primary radiation types associated with radioactivity. Radioactivity is the spontaneous emission of energy from the nucleus of certain elements, most notably uranium. There are three forms of energy associated with radioactivity; alpha, beta and gamma radiation.'

'Alpha particle radiation was found to be nuclei of helium atoms, two protons and two neutrons bound together. Alpha rays have a net positive charge.'

Alpha particles have the weak penetrating ability; a couple of inches of air or a few sheets of paper can effectively block them.

'While alpha particles are stopped by a piece of paper, the situation changes once alpha radiation is inside the body.' He noted, 'Aha, this is what Noah was talking about.' He read on, 'Er, then the effects are more harmful than beta or gamma radiation. So, materials that radiate Alpha particles are harmful if ingested or inhaled, but are not dangerous when external to the human body.' He commented, 'Well, at last, that was a lot clearer. Will I read about beta and gamma?'

'Yeah, go on, Ludwig,' said Snake. 'We need to know this stuff.'

'OK, er, where am I, oh yeah, here, er, beta radiation was found to be electrons, identical to the electrons found in atoms. Beta rays have a net negative charge. Beta rays have a greater penetrating power than alpha rays and can penetrate 3mm of aluminum.

'Gamma radiation and x-rays are high-energy, electromagnetic radiation, high-energy photons. This classification of radiation has the greatest penetrating power. High-energy gamma rays are able to pass through several centimeters of lead and still be detected on the other side. Gamma rays are produced naturally from the decay of some radioactive materials. X-rays, on the other hand, is man-made radiation used in medicine and dentistry. While x-rays are man-made electromagnetic radiation, their frequency is so high that the radiation is also ionizing.

'Natural background nuclear radiation is a normal part of our life on planet Earth, it says here. We are bombarded with nuclear radiation every day. Background radiation, from natural sources on Earth and cosmic rays, will cause the Geiger counter to click randomly a number of times every minute. When performing radiation checks to see if a material is radioactive or contaminated with radioactive material, this background radiation count is usually deducted from the reading to evaluate if a material is radioactive.' He surmised, 'I guess that's kind of the gist of it.'

'Well read, Ludwig,' said Noah. 'It was very clear.'

Snake picked up the Geiger counter and said,

‘There won’t be any batteries in it. They wouldn’t have lasted and they’d have made a huge mess of the insides. Lucky for us we have plenty of spare batteries that we brought in our backpacks. They’re fresh. And we got some solar chargers and some rechargeable batteries as well so we should be set. So, what we should do today, actually right away after breakfast, is put some batteries in a couple of Geiger counters and measure the background radiation around our camp.’

‘Very good idea,’ said Noah. ‘I think you may rest easy, though, because I checked it out with my ship as I flew in and it is well within safe levels, although only for about one year as the dose accumulates in your bodies over time. Then you will need to move on. Personally, I wouldn’t mind taking a closer look at the nearby nuclear plants, and as I said before, I can take a passenger. But before we do anything else, I think that we should all partake of some Mana. It will actually help our bodies to deal with the radiation, not to mention extend our potential life spans.’

The whole group gathered around the main fire to pass around the Mana pipe. While they were all gathered together like that, Noah spoke to them.

‘I have been wrestling with this information for days. I really wanted you guys to find this out for yourselves, for nothing more than the adventure you understand. Discovering something can be very exciting. So, it comes with some regret that I have decided to tell you this news myself, er, only because of the current circumstances. Er, the big news is that the majority of the California coast has slid into the Pacific Ocean. The water laps up to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada range now. The Central Valley is completely flooded by the Pacific. You know, I really wanted your scouting party to discover this, as I said, purely for the adventure of it, however greater priorities have arisen and here I am, telling this to you myself. Sorry.’

There were gasps of shock and amazement heard around the group as the magnitude of the century-old catastrophe sunk in. They all also seemed to instinctively understand that they were going to have to get over the whole cataclysm eventually, so they all calmly resolved to get over it pretty much there and then. Unbeknownst to any of them, though, was the extent that their states of mind were under telepathic control by Noah. He wanted them calm and in control.

5

By mid-morning, they had put fresh batteries in two Geiger counters and two men, Ludwig and Cowboy, set off to explore the latent radioactivity in the area surrounding Pinecrest Lake. They were gone for the rest of the day.

Snake and Noah studied the map. Noah decided that he wanted to fly over the sunken Diablo Canyon power plant, as well as the San Onofre Plant that was located on the old Pacific coast of California, in the northwestern corner of San Diego County, south of San Clemente. Although he wasn't 100 percent sure, Noah believed that this part of the coast had subsided into the sea as well. He was personally very excited and looking forward to exploring that whole coastal region.

The third power plant he wanted to check was, he felt, the most important because it was still on the surface. It was the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station located near Tonopah in western Arizona. It was located about 45 miles due west of downtown Phoenix. He figured that even after one century it was still spewing its radioactivity all over the surrounding countryside. He intended to approach its location very carefully.

The fourth and last nuclear plant he wanted to see was The Columbia Generating Station located 10 miles north of Richland, Washington.

Those were the four closest nuclear power plants to the group of survivors. The San Onofre plant was about 400 miles due south, the Palo Verde plant was about 550 miles slightly east of south and the Columbia plant was about 600 miles north of Pinecrest Lake.

Noah knew some facts about US nuclear power. For example, he knew that the USA was the world's largest producer of nuclear power, accounting for more than 30 percent of worldwide nuclear generation of electricity.

A very democratic show of hands unanimously voted for Jonesy to be the first person of the group to take a ride in Noah's magnificent spaceship as he flew on his reconnaissance to measure the latent radioactivity associated with the four nearest nuclear power plants.

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Chapter Seventy-Seven

RECONNAISSANCE

1

'You always were a lucky bastard, Jonesy,' Snake whispered into Jonesy's ear as the whole group stood transfixed around Noah's ship.

'Luck's what you make it,' Jonesy whispered back as he loaded a couple of fresh batteries into a Geiger counter. 'Might as well take one of these. There's no knowin what we'll find out there.'

'Would you all like me to make her disappear?' Noah asked playfully referring to his spaceship.

'Yeah sure, oh OK, go ahead, I'd like to see that,' came the collective skeptical reply.

Suddenly the ship disappeared right in front of their eyes. Everyone gasped in awe.

'She's still there,' Noah chuckled, 'you can touch her. But you can't see her because she's shining in UV light just outside your visible spectrum.'

'How did you do that?' asked Ludwig.

'I control all functions of the ship telepathically,' Noah casually replied.

Everyone gasped again. They were further amazed when he displayed the ship's chameleon function.

'I often park her in this mode. She just blends into the background, as you can see, and no one notices her.'

There was a collective 'ooooh' as a panel opened in the lower hull and lowered itself as a silver ramp, which appeared to be covered in some sort of black grippy rubber, ending up almost, but not quite, touching the grass on the bank of the lake. Everyone tried to see inside. Seeing this, Noah said cheerfully,

'In time, I'll give everyone a ride. It's a heap of fun but not quite what you might be expecting.'

'What do you mean by that?' asked Dirk DeRongo, straining his neck to look inside the ship.

'It has to do with the sensation of movement when one is inside. There *is* none. It feels like you are floating in a small room watching everything happening on a screen. It usually comes as quite a surprise the first time you experience it.'

'You mean that you can't feel the ship moving around?' asked Ace the helicopter pilot.

'No,' replied Noah. 'It's like you're floating in a cockpit watching a movie on a screen and the movie is showing you that you are travelling at the speed of light squared.'

'Holy crap!' exclaimed Snake, 'and I thought the Vette we rented in Sanfran was fast.'

2

Noah walked up the ramp into the ship followed by Jonesy who turned and gave everyone a wave and a big smile just before entering.

'Look,' said Snake with a hint of sarcasm, 'now he thinks he's the president of the United States.'

The interior of the ship was illuminated in a warm, easy on the eyes glow although Jonesy couldn't see any of the light sources. The light was just there in the air. The space inside was circular. There were no partitions. In the center of the ship were two very comfortable-looking, semi-supine, dark-grey bucket seats. They did not appear unlike sports seats out of an exotic sports car, except that they extended all the way out to support the feet, like a dental chair. On closer inspection, Jonesy noticed later that the seats were covered in a material made of intricately-woven, fine strands of what looked like some kind of carbon fiber. He could see no stitching however. The bucket seats were separated by a rectangular metal-mesh basket that was about two feet long, one foot across and one foot deep. Incorporated into the front of the basket were two, mesh, water-bottle receptacles, just like in most modern cars. Jonesy could see Noah's water bottle sitting in one of them. Around the perimeter of the space, all Jonesy could see was one strapped-down surfboard and a circular row of cupped metal-mesh shelves incorporating some type of strapping. There were two lap belts made of the same material lying loosely across the seats. In the cupped shelves he could see one canvas duffel bag and two sizeable roll bags, all strapped down.

'There's not much in here,' said Jonesy.

‘That’s because we don’t spend much time in our ships,’ said Noah. ‘The whole idea is to minimize our exposure to the hostility of outer space, so we go as fast as possible. Actually, Jonesy, everyone fits out their own ship differently, depending on their requirements. If, for example, they were going to spend an extended period exploring a planet behind the shield of a strong magnetosphere, they might fit out their ship the way you would fit out a Winnebago here on Earth.’

‘Hey, I got one of them.’

‘Had, Jonesy, had. And I knew that. Where do you think we time chipped you?’

Jonesy looked around. He noted,

‘I don’t see no controls.’

‘All telepathic,’ Noah replied. ‘Come sit in your seat.’ He gestured towards the left seat.

They both sat in their respective seats.

‘You don’t really need the belt,’ said Noah, ‘however I encourage you to use it the first time.’

Jonesy joined the two strap ends. They connected not unlike Velcro but they weren’t Velcro.

Jonesy watched the ramp silently rise up and seal the ship. He watched all the intrigued faces of his group disappear from view. As he sat in his seat, he turned his head and asked,

‘How do you see out of this thing? There ain’t no windows.’

‘Check this out,’ said Noah in a clever voice.

In an instant, the two men became surrounded with what appeared to be a translucent, spherical television screen. Suddenly Jonesy could see everything outside the ship in whichever direction he looked. He could also partially see the interior of the ship through the screen.

‘Holy cow, Noah, this is a trip. Look, there’s the group. We can see them but they can’t see us. Is that right?’

‘That’s affirmative. I’ll just dim the inside light. The screen works better that way.’

As the ambient light of the interior of the ship dimmed to darkness, the screen lost its translucency. It appeared to Jonesy like there was now no ship

surrounding them anymore, there was just the exterior, which was perfectly rendered on the most amazing spherical television screen he'd ever seen, and them lounging on the comfortable chairs in the center of it. It was as if they were levitating in their chairs.

'It's called a spherical hologram display, Jonesy. It's supported by the air in the ship. There are cameras in the hull, and there is a, er, pretty fancy central data processor, for the image.'

'So, you can see everything when you're flyin around.'

'Yes, in perfect color and definition.'

'That's what I like about flyin my trike the most.'

'Used to like, Jonesy, used to like. There is a new kind of flying coming your way I'm pretty sure. There is a guy on Rama that's making levitation backpacks for non-telepaths like you. I doubt you'll ever want to fly a trike after you've flown with one of those.'

'You better ease up, Noah, you're startin to trip me out.'

Noah laughed and replied, 'You better get used to it, I think.' Returning to the holographic display he added, 'The screen can also render in X-ray, infra-red, or ultra-violet if I will it to, all in full color.'

'Jesus H, Noah.'

'Are you ready to go?' Noah asked.

Jonesy gripped the sides of the seat and replied, 'Let er rip!'

3

Noah could have done one of his zero-to-thirty-thousand-feet-in-a-nanosecond takeoffs however he resisted the urge despite the fact that he derived a mild pleasure at impressing the uninitiated. Instead he chose to rise very slowly, about five feet per second, giving Jonesy time to absorb the experience.

'Hey, I'm floatin, sorta, an I don't feel anythin.'

'That is because we have been rendered massless, Jonesy. I'll explain it to all of you one night around the campfire. Basically, the upper and lower hulls of the ship control the flow of gravitons through the ship. The same thing that causes gravity causes mass. By eliminating mass, we eliminate the annoyances of momentum and inertia. Thus, we do not feel any movement inside the ship. No acceleration or deceleration.'

'Yeah,' Jonesy agreed. 'It feels like we're in a flyin simulator watchin a screen. What you climbing out at? It looks about 300 feet a minute. That's about what my trike can do in calm air.'

'Could do, Jonesy, could do. 300 is pretty close actually.'

'I used to do some flyin not far from here,' said Jonesy scrutinizing the terrain. 'I'm pretty familiar with the general lay of the land. I used to pick up some screamin thermals above the slopes just west of here. Got so high that I had to bail out of em cause I was freezin my nuts off.'

'How fascinating,' said Noah with a smile. Although he did not personally choose Jonesy to be a time shifter, he felt that he was certainly a good choice. He did, after all, manage to pull sixteen others through time with him, and he was certainly, through his deep involvement with LSD, super-primed for the wave of extraordinary experiences to come. Many time shifters were chosen for that reason alone because they were better prepared to deal with everything telepathic. To a non-telepath, the telepathic mind plane manifests in ways that closely resemble acute schizophrenia.

The flying felt like it wasn't real. It felt simulated. The only real thing seemed to be the very odd sensation of the absence of mass and, as a consequence, weight.

'Tricky gettin used to this massless flight,' commented Jonesy.

'Yes, it can be, but one adjusts quite quickly, and you will really appreciate it when we start doing some real flying, right about now. We need to go much higher to get a proper perspective of what I want to show you. I think that you better brace yourself for a shock.'

'Not much shocks me these days,' Jonesy replied with a hint of smugness. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, they shot straight up and froze in a hover sixty miles above Pike's Peak. 'Holy crap!' exclaimed Jonesy. 'What just happened? Are we really this high? I never felt a thing. Where's the valley? It's all ocean! All that's left are some islands.'

Jonesy's shock was palpable.

They began to fly out in a southwesterly direction. Jonesy, looking into the distance, exclaimed, 'Sanfran is gone!' He was beginning to hyperventilate, mildly panicking at the dramatic change to what used to be his home turf. Noah began

to actively calm him by telepathic means. Jonesy remained completely unaware of this. As Jonesy settled, Noah very calmly suggested,

‘I thought we might fly down the new west coast.’

Jonesy might have been artificially chilled however the mini volcano of anxiety, rumbling deep down within him, did not want to stifle easily. His eyeballs were nearly popping out of their sockets as he looked for the towns of his youth. ‘Modesto ... Turlock ... Merced ... they’re all swimmin with the fishes!’ he exclaimed.

‘Yes, Jonesy, regretfully the whole valley has subsided. The San Andreas, and probably every other fault in the region, must have let go in the off-the-scale earthquakes that followed the comet strike.’

All of a sudden Jonesy understood everything. All in one go it all became clear to him and he almost instantly reverted to his natural, laconic calmness. Ninety-nine percent of this rapid re-centering was the result of Jonesy’s mind being actively manipulated by Noah.

Noah was looking up ahead. He really wanted to see the state of the southern California coast. ‘It’s the southern part of the coast I’m interested in,’ he said, ‘because that is where the nuclear plants are located.’

‘See that big island out there,’ said Jonesy pointing, ‘the one with the double peak.’

‘Yes,’ said Noah focusing on the island.

‘I’ll bet my mother-in-law that it’s what’s left of the Diablo Range. The peaks used to be Mt Diablo. The smaller island to the west of it is probably the peak of Mt. Zion. And the islands to the west of that must be the Santa Lucia Range. The biggest island of those must be Cone Peak. That was over five thousand feet high. I flew around that peak in my trike. It looks like parts of the coast sank as much as three thousand feet.’ Jonesy said the last part as cool as if he was describing an afternoon shower, thanks to Noah.

‘I’m still having trouble getting past your mother-in-law, Jonesy.’

They both had a hearty laugh.

‘Nobody ever takes that bet. I wonder why?’

‘Oh, I can’t imagine.’

More laughter.

'Wow,' exclaimed Jonesy, 'look how the Sierra Nevada drops off into the ocean to become a string of islands. The old San Jacquin Valley is a sea now. And there ain't no L.A. no more. Can't say as I'm too upset about that. I gotta say, though, the coast is lookin a might more interestin than what it used to. There's so many islands. It makes you think about gettin a boat.'

'That would be right except for the radiation in the ocean,' said Noah.

'And the three eyed fish,' added Jonesy.

They were still flying sixty miles above the ground. Noah began drifting west and losing altitude. He noted,

'Well, there can be no doubt that the Diablo Canyon power plant is at least two, maybe three thousand feet under the sea. And judging by the look of it, the San Onofre plant, further south, is submerged as well. The ocean will be keeping them cool, however they will be poisoning the waters for miles around. I definitely will not be looking for surf anywhere around here.'

'There was one more plant you mentioned,' said Jonesy.

'Yes, that is correct. That is the one I'm really interested in because pretty for sure it is still exposed on the surface. It's the Palo Verde plant near Tonopah Arizona, about 45 miles west of where Phoenix used to be.

4

They flew over the ocean where the San Onofre Nuclear Plant used to be located. There they changed heading to due east. Jonesy observed, with amazement, how what used to be the eastern shore of the Salton Sea was now part of the new west coast of North America. As they crossed the coast and began flying over the parched desert environment, Noah speculated,

'I don't expect there to be anything left of the actual structure of the Palo Verde plant. The windblast from the comet strike was something like nine hundred to a thousand miles per hour. The plant was blown out of existence by that.'

Jonesy's eyebrows were competing for real estate with his hair on top of his head as he listened. Noah continued,

'Any radioactive material that was located above the surface, like the core and spent fuel rods, will have been blown downwind all over the desert, contaminating hundreds of square miles, maybe thousands. The subterranean

stuff should still be there, white-hot-molten, burrowing its way to China, not really, but you know, the movie. Well, that molten core will be spewing out mega radiation that will be carried for hundreds of miles in the prevailing winds. And don't forget that the half-life of Plutonium is 240,000 years, give or take. You do the math, Jonesy.'

For the first time since he met him, Jonesy detected a distinct tone of anger in Noah's voice. Noah went on,

'There should be a hole in the desert where the Palo Verde plant used to be. Out of the hole will be spewing massive heat and radiation. I'll activate the detectors. I wouldn't be surprised if they go right off the scale as we fly over the spot.'

'So, this must have happened to every plant in the USA,' said Jonesy in a haunting voice.

'Every plant on the planet,' replied Noah. 'I imagine that Europe and America are largely uninhabitable. It is my guess that the only places reasonably conducive to life are Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the southern half of South America and some South Pacific and South Atlantic islands, although we are not completely sure about them. We will have to scout them out.'

Jonesy sighed deeply, 'Wow! I belong to one dumbass sonofabitch species, don't I?'

'Well ... don't be too harsh ... you know, it is what it is,' said Noah trying to sound philosophical. 'One thing is for sure, though, there was 100 percent certainty of all the nuclear power plants on Earth eventually melting down for one unforeseen reason or another. It was never going to end any other way. That is what makes Earth humans ... er ... marginally less than genius. What can one say? One can't say much.'

'Einfrigginstein,' suggested Jonesy.

'You said it!' Noah replied exasperated.

As they approached the location of the now defunct Palo Verde plant, the display began to turn patchwork red. Over the plant location the color turned solid yellow.

'One wouldn't survive but a few minutes anywhere near there,' said Noah. Jonesy could see that he was upset. Noah continued, 'You know, Jonesy, I believe

that Palo Verde was the largest plant in the United States. As well, they even stored depleted fuel rods there from other plants.'

Jonesy stayed silent. Noah swept his hand across the screen.

'Do you see the radiation pattern? See how all those fuel rods got blasted all over the desert downwind from the comet strike.' They shot up to 100 miles above the Earth. The most prominent feature in their field of view was now the 220-mile-wide impact crater, which was still smoking in the center after 100 years. Noah continued, 'The pattern is clear. All the radioactive material got blown in a south-south-westerly direction directly away from the crater.' Jonesy was stunned at the size of the crater. This was the first time he had a proper look at it.

'That is one mother of a hole there, Noah. How high are we now?'

'100 miles,' Noah replied. He waved his hand again and added, 'All that ground south of where the plant used to be, all the way through Mexico, is completely lethal. Let's go lower again and fly towards the crater. I'd like to scan the radioactivity upwind of the plant.'

'We'll be flyin towards Vegas. We ought to check out Hoover Dam an see if it survived the impact,' suggested Jonesy.

'Capital idea, Jonesy. Would you like to navigate? Is the ground familiar to you?'

'Fairly, except there's no sign of any civilization,' said Jonesy. After a moment he announced really surprised, 'Hey, there ain't no Lake Mead. There's supposed to be a huge lake down there, just east of where Vegas is supposed to be. An there ain't no Hoover Dam either. It musta got pulverized to dust an then got washed away by the drainin lake. An there is absolutely nothin left of Vegas. Holy crap.'

'Much of that lake water would have boiled away,' Noah suggested.

Noah flew the ship lower as they flew further north. He turned the ship back towards the sun and hovered it about twenty thousand feet up. He made an observation.

'See there, Jonesy, when you get the angle just right, how the sun reflects off the ground in patches like the patches were made of glass.'

'Yeah,' said Jonesy in a mystified voice.

'Well, I think they are patches of glass that are not covered by the shifting sands. It would appear that the heat of the comet strike melted all the sands of the desert into glass. It's quite amazing. Don't you think so?'

'Mind blowin,' replied Jonesy.

They continued to slowly fly in a northerly direction paying attention to the levels of radioactivity on the ground. The edge of the giant comet crater was about four hundred miles to the northeast of them, around about the location of where Salt Lake City used to be. Salt Lake City was vaporized in the impact blast. Noah was suddenly distracted by something unrelated. He announced, slightly dramatically,

'Hold it, hold it, I'm picking up a time chip on the ground.'

'How you doin that?' Jonesy asked.

'Telepathically,' Noah replied. 'The device registers as an icon in my mind. I will display it on the screen.'

'Is it like mine?'

'Yes.'

A red icon began to glow on the spherical display. It appeared superimposed on the ground in the distance to the northwest of them.

'It's up-blast-wind from here so at least there should be no fuel rods scattered there,' said Noah. 'However, the environment there should nonetheless still be extremely hostile to anything alive.'

'We gonna check it out?' Jonesy asked.

'Absolutely,' replied Noah with a renewed verve.

5

Noah and Jonesy descended rapidly as they zeroed in on the icon glowing red on the spherical screen. They came to a silent hover above a small body of water located about 90 miles west-northwest of where Las Vegas used to be.

'Water!' exclaimed Noah. 'It's an oasis in the desert.'

Jonesy knew something about it.

'It might be the ol Ash Meadows Springs,' he suggested. 'There's like an aquifer under the desert for hundreds of miles an the spring water seeps to the surface in a few places. It's supposed to have saved the odd life or two over the years the ways that I've heard it.'

'I can imagine,' said Noah. 'It looks like our time shifter is a horse.'

Two hundred feet below them they could see a horse standing next to three, what appeared like, small tents. The horse was grazing on a tuft of grass growing on the bank of a crystal-clear pond.

'You think there's anyone in them tents, Noah?'

'I'd say so, Jonesy.'

Noah almost immediately became distracted by the radiation readout on the screen.

'Notice the radiation levels around here.' He pointed them out to Jonesy. 'They are definitely elevated enough to prevent us from walking on the ground. The problem is not so much about us being exposed for the short term, it is that we would track the radioactive dirt back into the ship and contaminate the interior. It would be a nightmare to try and clean that out. We must therefore be very cautious as to how we go about things here.'

'Sure, I understand,' Jonesy replied sounding all business. He observed, 'Look, the horse hasn't even noticed us yet.'

'That is more than likely because we are absolutely silent, and we're coming from out of the sun. He'll see us soon enough though. I'll make an attempt at calming him when he does.'

'How?'

'Oh, telepathically.'

'Can you do that?'

'Er, actually I hope I can because I am not that good with horses. We'll see as soon as he looks up.'

'If this is Ash Meadows,' said Jonesy sounding all knowledgeable, 'then this would be the Amargosa part of the Mojave Desert. That water is fossil water that entered the groundwater system tens of thousands of years ago.'

'If that is the case,' replied Noah, 'it would mean that that water is absolutely pure and completely uncontaminated by radiation. You certainly seem to know your geography, Jonesy.'

'Well, I spent years flyin my trike all over this damn desert. It was some of the best times of my life.'

'I'll bring us around 180 degrees,' said Noah.

As the silver disc silently flew a half-circle in the clear-blue sky, Jonesy immediately observed,

'They're not tents, they're half-tents, bivouacs, and there's people in em, looks like asleep. Why are they sleepin in the middle of the day?'

'They must be sheltering from the heat,' suggested Noah. 'They're probably travelling during the coolness of the night. OK, let me try to come down really slowly in front of the horse without startling it too much.'

'Looks to me like a quarter-horse stallion,' observed Jonesy. 'Pretty big too, maybe seventeen hands. Black as the ace of spades.'

As they approached cautiously in a gradual descent, they both noticed one individual crawl from under their bivouac and kneel down next to another in one of the other bivouacs.

As the horse looked up to see what was going on, his attention was immediately distracted by a bright glint of sunlight reflecting off a shiny silver object silently hovering in the sky no more than a good-size paddock away. His initial instinct was to react and maybe back away, however he almost instantly calmed and just watched the fantastic flying craft descend towards him.

'The person is completely covered by an overall with a hood,' said Jonesy. 'They even got some kind of facemasks on.'

'Yes, I see that,' said Noah. 'I don't see any part of their skin exposed.'

'Who are they?' said Jonesy mystified.

'And what are they doing out here?' added Noah.

'Lucky for them they found water.'

'That is right, but where did they come from? And how long have they been walking?'

'Yeah, and where did they get the fancy duds?'

'Precisely,' said Noah. 'This is turning into a far more interesting reconnaissance than I originally envisaged.'

The levitating duo observed the overalled individual appear to attend to another overalled individual lying on their side curled up.

'The impression I'm getting, Jonesy, is that the person lying down is not well and that the other person is trying to help them.'

'They still haven't spotted us,' said Jonesy.

'The horse has,' replied Noah. 'I'll park us ten feet off the ground about thirty feet away. The person will notice us when they turn around. Unfortunately, you will not be able to leave the ship. I will have to get dressed in my levitation suit to go outside and I will refrain from making contact with the ground. I will communicate with them in that fashion. You will be able to speak to them from the hatch. How does that sit with you?'

'Good plan, Noah,' replied Jonesy. 'Definitely don't want to crap up the insides of the ship.'

The intergalactic cruiser silently settled into its hover-park mode. They felt their mass, and the gravity within the ship, return to normal. Jonesy observed with amusement as the interior illuminated, reverting the holographic spherical display to a translucent appearance. Noah stood up out of his seat and stepped towards one of the metal-mesh shelves in the back. He asked Jonesy to let him know if the people noticed them while he got changed into his suit.

While Jonesy kept a close eye on the people outside, Noah stripped down naked then pulled on his skin-tight, hyper-stretch, telepathically controlled, levitation suit. By the time he pulled the hood over his head, Jonesy announced,

'I think they just seen us.'

The person on the ground stood next to the horse and froze in a stare. They called out to a third person who immediately rose to their feet. Jonesy and Noah could hear the call via the ship's internal sound system.

'That sounded like a girls voice,' said Noah.

Although the two people on the ground were not dressed in absolutely skin-tight overalls, it quickly became obvious to the men in the spaceship that they were women. The third person lying curled up in the half-tent, upon noticing the spaceship, struggled to his feet and placed himself between the ship and the girls.

'I think that's a dude,' said Jonesy, 'an he don't look the best judgin by the way he's hunched over.'

'He looks sick,' Noah observed, 'and look how he has placed himself in front of the women, to protect them. I find that particularly admirable. I like this guy already.'

'The horse looks like he don't know what to think,' said Jonesy.

'That is because I've got him on a very short tether, mentally speaking,' replied Noah.

'Do you think they speak English?' Jonesy asked.

'One way to find out. I'll open the hatch.'

They were still parked ten feet off the ground. The translucent display faded into thin air. The hatch silently opened and lowered to a horizontal position. Suddenly the environment of the exterior washed over their senses. They immediately felt a surge of hot, dry air and heard the peculiar silence that is filled with muted sounds, so typical of a desert landscape. Just for a brief moment they became entranced by the haunting gusts of the wilderness wind and the glaring radiance of the blazing sun.

The desert was an environment Jonesy loved with a passion because he found his freedom there. 'Any place that's got no people in it,' he used to say. Most folks would have considered a place like that to be hell on Earth, but to Jonesy it was heaven itself. He had never been a joiner, in fact he harbored a pathological aversion to any kind of group. He reveled in solitude. After a couple of fat 'doobies,' while maybe sitting around the evening campfire in the company of some other 'escapee from the nut farm' that he might have coincidentally crossed paths with, he philosophically proclaimed, Sartre like, 'Hell is other people, man.' That concept came to him during a particularly enlightening acid trip.

Noah pulled his goggles over his eyes. The goggles in combination with the hood completely covered his head.

'How do I look?' he asked.

'Like a bloody alien,' replied Jonesy.

They looked out through the hatch. They couldn't see the faces of the trio on the ground because they were wearing their facemasks to protect their eyes from the sun. If they had been able to see their eyes, they would have seen them nearly popping out of their sockets out of sheer amazement. Noah called out as calmly as he could,

'Do any of you speak English?'

With bemusement, he telepathically heard the horse reply,

'I do, but I can't talk. Have you seen my precious?'

Noah turned to Jonesy and whispered,

'That's no ordinary horse.'

'He'd look a sight better cleaned up,' replied Jonesy.

'We all speak American,' the young man replied.

'We are not hostile,' declared Noah. 'We are scouts on a reconnaissance who have found you by accident. Why are you completely covered?'

The young man pointed towards the sun and replied,

'Our eyes and skin burn under the great light.'

'The sun, Griffy,' said one of the masked girls.

'Yes, of course, the sun, it burns us. We cannot remove our masks when the sun is in the great nothing.'

'The sky,' said the other girl.

'Yes, of course, the sky.'

The horse shook his head. Noah heard him think,

'Right now, I'd give up a paddock full of fillies to be able to speak.'

Noah barely controlled a huge belly laugh. He didn't want to unintentionally offend the trio however he was most bemused by the horse. Right at that moment he was more mystified by the group than at the initial encounter.

Noah thought for a moment, then enquired,

'Would it help if we moved our craft over you to shade you from the sun?'

The trio looked at each other, nodded, and the young man replied,

'That would help heaps, although we would still need to stay covered up. The glare is enough to hurt our eyes and burn our skin. But it would make it much easier for us to talk out in the open.'

Without the hatch closing, and without Noah or Jonesy even budging an inch, the silver ship silently drifted closer, lifted to about twenty feet and again hover-parked itself casting its shadow over the group on the ground.

Noah's levitation suit changed color from black to a mid-grey. It was now similar to the color of the outfits worn by the trio on the ground.

'You changed the color of your suit,' said Jonesy. 'I suppose you did that telepathically.'

'Affirmative,' Noah replied. 'I want to startle them as little as possible. They will anyway be quite taken aback by my levitation.'

'And you fly telepathically too?'

‘Certainly. It’s the *only* way to fly.’

Jonesy experienced a brief micro-mindspin after that comment as he made an attempt to validate trike flying to himself.

Noah lifted off the ramp and slowly floated out of the ship. In order to be able to better see the goings-on on the ground, Jonesy lay down on his stomach with his head at the end of the ramp and his chin resting on his folded arms.

Noah gently floated down to ground level and placed himself in a hover in the midst of the group. ‘A proper greeting,’ he said cheerfully. ‘I cannot convey to you how surprised we are to find you here,’ he looked around, ‘in this vast desert.’

‘Not half as surprised as we are to see you,’ said the male in a struggling voice.

‘I gather that you are unwell, sir,’ said Noah sounding sympathetic. ‘First let me introduce myself. My name is Noah and my companion up there,’ he pointed at Jonesy, ‘his name is Jonesy. We are on a reconnaissance scouting out the terrain for residual radioactivity.’

‘Hello, ugh, my name is ... ugh ... my ...’

The man slumped over and placed his hands around his stomach. He turned to the side and attempted to vomit, but nothing came out. He dry retched. One of the girls aided him by placing one arm around his shoulders and one hand over his forehead. The other girl spoke to Noah.

‘His name is Griffin, my name is Fin and she is my sister, Tip. Griff has been ill for three days. He is actually better today however he was very sick for two days before. The creature’s name is Horse. He saved our lives three nights ago, back at the lake of light. And it was Horse who led us to this pool of water. How are you floating like that?’

Noah smiled as he floated just above the ground.

‘That is a technical answer that I would like to leave till later,’ he said. Then he asked, ‘Which of you owns the horse?’

Noah figured that the horse got time shifted during the comet strike. He further assumed that the man and his two female companions were time shifted with the horse through some form of connectedness.

‘None of us owns Horse,’ replied Fin. ‘He befriended us three nights ago when he rescued us from a pack of nasty, hairy, big-tooth rat things.’

'Really? You didn't come with the horse? Now I am completely mystified as to how the three of you find yourselves out here in the middle of nowhere. Are you sure you met the horse three nights ago?'

'Positive,' groaned Griffin.

'I make it the 28th September today, Jonesy,' Noah said to Jonesy.

'If you say so,' Jonesy answered.

'That would make three nights ago the 25th, two days after the shift. How are you guys here?' Noah asked again.

'We climbed up a ladder out of the base,' replied Fin.

'Griff led us up to the surface,' added Tip.

Noah gasped in astonishment. It began to dawn on him that this trio might have been the remnant of the human race that actually somehow survived the extinction. He also rapidly deduced that they must have been about the fifth generation post the apocalypse and that all the original survivors must have died many decades ago, but not before producing their offspring. And this must have continued for five generations, for a whole century. These thoughts, powerful as they were, were nonetheless overshadowed by the presented crisis, which was the prevalent radioactivity and all its associated complications. So instead of asking more questions about their survival, Noah focused on Griffin's malady.

'I really would love to hear your story, however that will have to come later.' Noah pulled the goggles and balaclava off his head, revealing his face, and let them hang behind his neck. He turned to Griffin and said, 'You have been ill for three days, you say, and today you are feeling better?'

'A little,' Griffin replied.

Noah knew about radiation sickness. He looked up and asked Jonesy to hand him the Geiger counter that he brought on the reconnaissance. Jonesy did as he was asked and passed it down to Noah.

'Do any of you know anything about radioactivity?'

Griffin, Fin and Tip looked at each other. They even looked at the horse. They all shook their heads. Griffin groaned,

'I've never even heard the word. What is it?'

'By Rama, where do I start?' said Noah in an exasperated voice. He thought for a moment, then explained, 'Er, it is a confounded story so I'll save it for a later

time. The main thing to know right now is that it can make people sick and that it may be the cause of your unwellness, although we are certainly not certain of that yet.' He showed them the Geiger counter. 'This instrument is for measuring radioactivity,' he explained, 'and I must take some readings with it.'

6

The girls helped Griffin lie back down under his bivouac while Noah took measurements of the ground around the spring.

'The activity around here is definitely elevated,' he said, 'although not critical.' As he came close to the girls the Geiger counter came to life in a burst of crackles. Noah homed in on the source of the radiation, which seemed to be the girls' overalls. The loudest crackles came from their boots. The crackling continued up the legs of the overalls in a gradually decreasing intensity.

'Your clothing is highly contaminated by something,' Noah explained while levitating a foot off the ground around the girls and holding out the Geiger counter. 'Judging by the pattern of the radiation on your clothing, I envisage that you must have walked across some ground that was much more radioactive than what it is around here. You must have kicked this material up and got it on your boots and clothes as you walked.' Noah sounded very studious as he attempted to analyze the situation. He passed the Geiger counter over Griffin and found him similarly contaminated. He then gave a suspicious look at the horse then floated over to him. The stallion tried to back away thinking,

'Careful with that thing, two legs.'

Noah calmed the beast telepathically as he passed the instrument over his body. He found his legs, and even his underbelly, similarly contaminated.

'You are all covered in radioactive contaminant that will eventually make you all sick.' He looked at Griffin and spoke to him directly. 'I suspect that you must have ingested some of the poisonous material somewhere along the way. That would certainly explain your current symptoms. Can you remember any time when you might have ingested something off the ground?'

'Yes,' Griffin replied in a sickly voice, 'I tasted the salt from the lake of light.'

'How long ago?' Noah asked.

'Three nights,' replied Fin sounding concerned.

'The lake of light?' Noah enquired further.

'Yes. We came upon it in our walk westward,' said Fin.

'It glowed and we didn't know what it was,' added Tip.

'So Griff tasted some and found out it was salt,' said Fin.

'We set off to cross it,' said Tip.

'But the ugly big-toothed, hairy, rat things attacked us,' said Fin.

'But Horse rescued us,' said Tip.

'By the time we walked off the lake of light, Griff was already starting to get sick,' Fin finished up.

'I see,' said Noah in a curiously suspicious voice. He speculated that the radioactive fallout must have gotten washed into the lakes during periods of rainfall and concentrated there over the previous hundred years.

Noah had a rudimentary knowledge of radiation sickness. He took an interest in the subject when he became aware that the Earth humans had discovered atomic energy, although his interest was fueled primarily by the ancient, ongoing, shrouded activity of the mysterious and reviled Dark Ones. Upon commencing his research into the nuclear phenomenon on Earth, he quickly began to suspect that it was not the native Earth humans who ventured into the suicidal science, but the sadistic Dark Ones who lived their accursed existence through the bodies of the Earth humans via telepathic means.

Noah looked at Griffin as he lay doubled-up in his bivouac. He estimated, from his past research into radiation sickness, that, without help, Griffin would be dead within twenty-five days and that his death would be as horrific and agonizing as can possibly be imagined. Many victims of radiation sickness went completely screaming-mad towards the end of their lives as their brain slowly decomposed to mush. To them, death came as a welcome, merciful friend.

Noah's mind was swift and his ability to process information was even swifter. He looked around and observed that there were a number of crystal-clear pools. He spoke with sincerity.

'Look, it is plain to me that the three of you are in danger from radioactive material stuck to your clothing. By what you have told me, it is, in the main, salt, so it should wash off your clothing quite easily. Same goes for the horse.' He looked each of them in the eye and asked, 'So, may I help you?'

Tip and Fin looked at each other, nodded, then looked at Noah. Fin answered, 'Yes please, Noah.' There was gratitude in her voice.

'OK then. What I suggest is that the three of you take a swim in the small pool over there. I am afraid that it is necessary for you to do it fully clothed. While submerged, rub each other's clothing and shoes as vigorously as you can to wash the radioactive salt off as best as possible. After you have done that, lead the horse into the pool and wash it as well. I do not envy you that task, although I sense a great intelligence in the horse and feel that he shall pose no trouble to you.' Noah paused for a moment. He levitated over to the horse and looked him square in the eyes. Suddenly he laughed. He turned towards the girls and said in a slightly more lighthearted manner, 'Do you want to know what he calls us in his mind?'

'How could you know that?' Fin asked.

'Er ... I can read his mind, telepathically. I can hear him think, sort of.'

'How?' asked Tip.

'Would you like to know what he calls us?' Noah asked again.

'Yes.' The girls replied in unison.

'Two legs. He calls us two legs and it is meant to be a derogatory term. Like four legs is a whole lot better.' Noah laughed. 'And he let me know that his name is not Horse, but Fury.'

The girls laughed.

'Ohh, Fury, our saviour,' said Fin.

'Fury, the magnificent,' added Tip.

'I am sure that he enjoyed that,' said Noah, 'because he understands English, and he speaks it in his mind. He is a very intelligent horse, as horses go.'

'Fury the intelligent,' said both girls in unison as they hugged his neck.

'He don't mind that, I reckon,' said Jonesy from above.

Noah returned to the problem at hand. 'You must all wash the contaminant off yourselves. I suggest you go in the pool and stay in it as long as you can. While immersed, clean each other's clothing underwater, and clean the, I mean, clean Fury as well. It being such a hot day it will not take long for you to dry off. After you have dried, I will re-measure you all for radioactivity. After washing, be sure not to drink any water from that pool because it will be contaminated. You will need to help Griffin in the pool.'

While the trio and the horse washed the radioactive salt off their clothing and off the horse, Noah returned to the ship. He spoke to Jonesy with some seriousness.

‘Griffin is a dead man if we don’t help him. Probably even if we do.’

‘What can we do?’ Jonesy asked in a low voice.

‘I will begin the same way with him as I did with all of you. I will give him the Mana. That will help, however I am sure it will not be enough.’

‘Tough way to cash in your chips, radiation,’ said Jonesy.

‘Not many ways tougher,’ replied Noah.

The Earth human and the alien could feel their bond of friendship strengthening through their shared experience. They were so different, with such disparate histories, yet there it was, the genesis of a long and deep friendship.

7

After they had all washed the radioactivity off themselves, and dried off somewhat, Noah re-measured them with the Geiger counter and found their readings to have come down to background levels. He returned the instrument to Jonesy then retrieved the gold container and tiny ceramic white pipe. He gave each of them a smoke and told them that the length of their lives would be doubled by just that one ingestion. He told Griffin that the Mana would alleviate most of his symptoms for a while, however he would require more specialized treatment to fully heal. He refrained to mention the high risk of Griffin dying from his poisoning. He didn’t forget Fury either. He took a tiny grain of brown crumble, about the size of a grain of sugar, and placed it in his mouth. He whispered into his ear,

‘Live long, brave stallion.’

Noah stayed with them as the hours passed, never making contact with the contaminated earth. He moved the levitating ship, from time to time, in concert with the westward movement of the blazing sun, thus keeping the small camp in shade. He also brought the ship closer to the ground so that Jonesy could more easily participate in the conversation. And what an interesting conversation it was. Griffin, Fin and Tip told many stories of life in the base, Jonesy talked about his group’s survival and Noah told magical tales about Rama and the vast infinity of the cosmos. By sunset, Griffin’s symptoms had almost completely abated.

As the twilight set the western horizon ablaze, Noah broke out the Mana for the second time that day.

'Just to fortify the healing,' he said. Then he added, 'There will need to be a second part to your healing, Griffin. It is my belief that you will need to pass through the Fish. To do this you will need a master guide. I only know of one Fish adept currently living on this planet. Her name is Thebe, however I am not sure that radiation poisoning falls within her scope. There is a legend of a grand Fish master that lives among the Ilf people on my planet. It is said that she is a woman of wisdom more ancient than thought itself. Her name is Mimo, the wise, and she lives in the fashion of a bird, as do all the Ilf. I do not know her. I have never met her or even seen her. Hardly anyone has. I have only heard magical tales of her, and attempted descriptions of her fathomless wisdom. She is said to be older than any living Rama, yet it is said that her appearance is youthful. She is said to be a mystery within a mystery. The only person I know who might know her is a man called Rion. I shall be able to contact him as we are good friends. Such is my plan then for Griffin. I shall contact Rion who shall hopefully be able to take us to Mimo, the wise medicine woman of the Ilf. You three, Fin, Tip and Fury, should require nothing further than the Mana to be fully healed. Such is my judgement.'

When it became dark enough, Griffin, Fin and Tip were able to remove their facemasks. Noah and Jonesy were both awed by their elegant facial features. As it became very dark, Noah caused the intergalactic cruiser, hovering just above their heads, to glow in a soft yellow light. Noah mapped out his plan.

'I shall contact Maximillian of the Eos valley. Although they live some distance from one another, he is well acquainted with a very interesting man, called Powter the boatbuilder, who lives on the island of Engadine. I know that Powter owns a large transporter ship. We shall need to borrow it for the purpose of evacuating everyone from the North American continent. After the evacuation, we shall need to decontaminate the ship before returning it.'

Jonesy's ears pricked up.

'You intendin to evac us all outa the USA, Noah?'

'I am beginning to have doubts about the environment here, Jonesy. Australia is much friendlier. We shall be able to transport your container and everything in it, and you will be able to choose a place to settle. There are many

ideal locations.' Noah looked at Griffin, Fin and Tip. 'I recommend an evacuation for you three out of this contaminated desert.' Then Noah looked at Fury. 'Of course, we shall not forget you.' Then he focussed on Griffin. 'You, my new friend, shall have to come to Rama with me. While there, we shall meet up with Rion who shall, hopefully, take us to Mimo. This in itself will be daunting enough. Passing through the Fish, which is altogether another story, shall be the most challenging experience for you. It will alter your mind forever, and it is hoped, cure you of your radiation poisoning.'

Noah spoke to Jonesy.

'I think our reconnaissance is complete, Jonesy, and my plan is formulated. I must now set it in motion.'

Noah levitated some distance from the group and set himself in a meditative pose. He slid into a trance and entered the mind plane. There, through their shared mind thread, he established initial contact with Maximillian.

Thus, the rescue of the Mojave Desert and Pinecrest Lake survivors was set into motion.

8

It was not long after midnight in the morning of *Wednesday 29th September 2123*. A softly-glowing, almond-shaped ship hung lazily, like a Chinese lantern, above the arid Mojave. Its dim iridescence drew a tiny island of light out of the fathomless blackness. Above, an infinite cosmos, speckled with uncountable stars, expressed its illimitable vastness. Below, a small campfire flickered in the variable wafts of the fickle desert breezes. At the edge of this island of light was a pool of black water with tufts of reeds growing around its perimeter. Around the fire sat the three survivors from the base, their faces warmly illumined by the firelight. The pitch-black horse standing by the water was almost invisible except for a pair of campfire flames reflecting from his eyes.

Levitating amongst them, Noah was moved, again, by their attractive features and their noble demeanour. He also admired their inner spirits, which to him appeared as clear and pure as water from a mountain spring. He contemplated on how far from the telepathic realm these three could possibly be because he understood that virtue and morality were qualities often associated with the emergence into the mind plane. He thought about the nature of the

society in the base. He guessed that it must have remained very civilised and benevolent to its children, placing high value in preserving their precious gift of innocence.

Above the campfire, stretched out on the partially lowered ramp of the spaceship, Jonesy could occasionally be heard snoring as he had fallen asleep. Each snore elicited a quiet chuckle from all of them.

9

About an hour and a half before dawn, Noah, for the second time, slipped off to one side and entered a meditative trance. He, once again, linked up with Maximillian via their shared mind thread. Max had by then already contacted Powter who immediately responded to Max's request for the transporter ship. Together they remotely flew the ship across the sea and over thirty-two islands, from the Island of Engadine to the Eos Valley. From there, Max remotely, through telepathic control, sent the empty ship from the Andromeda Galaxy to the Milky Way Galaxy following the linked mind thread between himself and Noah. In telepathic terms, it was as if the transporter ship followed a golden stream of linked consciousness. Noah, while in his trance and linked to the ship and Max, took over remote control just outside the outer reaches of the Milky Way. At that point, Max was able to release his telepathic control, which allowed Noah to guide the empty vessel all the way in to the Mojave Desert.

All Rama technology is controlled telepathically. Their space ships may be controlled equally well from the exterior as the interior, and the distance between the ship and the operator is irrelevant because the mind plane, within which telepathic control occurs, is in actual fact a singularity, a situation where zero space and time, and infinite space and time, coexist.

10

Jonesy stirred from his slumber as the eastern sky lit up in shades of purples and reds. The group became more animated. Tip and Fin rose to their feet and meandered over to Fury who was standing by the water munching on a morsel of juicy grass. They hugged his neck and spoke to him in loving tones. Noah floated back to the campfire and parked himself next to Griffin.

'If everyone looks up,' he said, 'you will see the transporter ship approaching. I'll bring her in from the west so Jonesy can see it as well.'

It appeared high in the western sky as a bright star. It descended out of the fathomless darkness and grew in size as it approached.

“You flyin that thing, Noah?”

“That’s affirmative, Jonesy.”

“Now I’ve seen everythin.”

“Far from it, I assure you,” Noah replied.

The 180-foot diameter, almond-shaped, glowing, intergalactic transporter parked itself opposite Noah’s ship. It settled into a hover about a foot above terra firma. They all, except for Noah, observed in awe as a broad hatch opened on the underside of the hull and a ramp lowered itself, almost, but not quite, touching the ground, revealing the vast emptiness of its illuminated interior.

Noah invited Griffin, Tip and Fin to have a closer look. They walked up the ramp while Noah continued to levitate, ensuring that he did not come into contact with any contaminated ground. Once inside he explained,

‘I shall be in here with you during our flight to Pinecrest Lake. There are no seats so you shall have to stand over there.’ He pointed to one part of the perimeter wall. ‘You can hold on to the vertical bars there although you shall feel no movement as you’ll become weightless, not unlike when one floats in water. I would request that you girls keep Fury calm.’ He grabbed one short length of strapping from many of varying lengths, which were hanging around the perimeter of the interior and were used for tying down cargo, and handed it to Fin. ‘It might help to place this around Fury’s neck,’ he suggested.

After answering a few questions about where they were going and who they would meet there, Noah led them all outside again. He explained to Jonesy that he would fly both ships from the interior of the transporter and that Jonesy would be alone in Noah’s ship for the return journey.

The trio packed away their bivouacs, dressed for daylight, and entered the big transporter. The girls spoke softly to the horse as they led him up the ramp.

Jonesy sat in his seat in Noah’s ship and waited for something to happen. He watched the hatch close, the light dim and the spherical display appear. He felt himself become massless.

Noah levitated next to the others at one side of the interior. The ramp closed and sealed the big ship. A spherical display materialised in the air around all of

them. They felt themselves become massless. Fury agitated for a moment however Noah quickly calmed his mind via telepathic means.

There was no one there to witness the two glowing discs rise silently into the sky just as the first, long, golden rays of the rising sun kissed the tops of the parched hills to the west of Ash Meadows Springs.

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Chapter Seventy-Eight

THE PASSAGE

1

Mecca weighed anchor from Pittwater early in the morning on *Tuesday 5th October 2123*. They did not need to wait for a breeze nor did they need to fire up the diesel because they sailed by the power of gravity. Prior to leaving, Lloyd checked the wind generator and the solar panel next to it. They were both mounted out of the way on a custom stainless bracket at the stern of the boat. Because he intended to not run the diesel very much, if at all, these were indispensable for charging Mecca's two, solid-state, marine batteries. The batteries were used mainly for the instrumentation as well as the sound system. They kept Alex's 128GB iPod, with his collection of 10,000 songs, charged up. Mecca's radios were now redundant as there was no one to talk to. Also, the GPS was dead, however the depth sounder was still functional as was the tiller pilot. Very useful appliances were the small refrigerator and separate freezer. Eva filled them with oysters before they left Pittwater. Once at sea she began fishing from the stern. The fish she caught were much larger than those she caught in the bays. Once caught, the fish were cleaned, filleted and stored in the freezer. Seafood became the main source of their protein.

2

It was just after sunrise on *Wednesday, 6th October 2123*. It was dead calm. To starboard there was no horizon. There was just blue space with twin suns, a real one and its perfect reflection beneath it. To port, some two miles away, a thin line of land marked a horizon that stretched and disappeared beyond the curvature of the Earth to the north and south. The air was cool, but not cold.

Mecca glided across the mirror surface at a respectable eight knots. Her sails were furled and her motor was turned off. Her folding propeller provided next to zero drag. She made no sound except for the swishing of the bow wave as her streamlined hull cut through the water. She was being propelled solely by the power of gravity through the gravity sail attached to her stern. She was the first sea vessel on Earth, in the whole history of the planet, to be propelled by the vectored force of gravity.

They sailed all day, past the entrance to Port Stephens, some seventy nautical miles from their departure point, on through the sunset, ever northward.

They spent the night in a deep sleep in their bunks as Mecca sailed through the darkness like a ghost ship guided solely by her automatic tiller pilot, which was set to a compass-heading paralleling the coastline about two miles out to sea. They slept without concern, as they knew that in the post-apocalyptic year, 2123, there was zero chance of them being run down by a container ship, or any other type of vessel for that matter. They even figured that it was highly unlikely that any container that might have been floating menacingly just beneath the surface would have sunken to the bottom decades before.

At the first sign of morning light, they gradually, one by one, emerged on deck. Lloyd made the coffees. They sat in what seemed like a trance as their brains attempted to acclimatise to the surrealism of the moment.

'It's as if we are sailing on a ghost ship,' said Sophia in a haunting voice.

'It moves and steers itself with seemingly no power,' added Alex.

This brief exchange was followed by a protracted silence as they all focussed on the ambient sounds of their surroundings.

Eventually Alex enquired, after taking a sip of his coffee, 'How is the Grange holding out, Lloyd?' It wasn't so much that he was concerned about the state of the wine stores, it was more to break the fifteen-minute lull in the conversation.

Lloyd snapped out of his daydream and answered, 'Er, regretfully, a tad low. We have been indulging ourselves somewhat.'

'We must save enough to celebrate our arrival in Noosa,' suggested Eva.

'My liver agrees with you,' mumbled Sophia sitting leaning against Mecca's mast.

Eva changed the subject. 'You know,' she said in a perplexed voice, 'I've been trying to remember, but for the life of me, try as hard as I may, I can't remember the day I'm supposed to die anymore.'

'How positively discombobulating, my love,' said Lloyd. 'When do you think you forgot it?'

'Hang on!' exclaimed Alex. 'I can't remember mine either.'

'I'm trying to think,' said Eva. 'I remember the conversation I had with Ambriel, I told her that we knew our death dates, and I remember her surprise.'

And I remember how you, Sophia, told us how you had already forgotten yours, and now I can't remember mine.'

'I have news for all of you,' said Lloyd, 'I seem to have forgotten mine as well.'

'We have all forgotten something we best not know,' said Sophia. 'Perhaps someone helped us to forget, someone telepathic perhaps.'

'Oooooo,' said Alex.

'Oooooo indeed,' Lloyd agreed.

'It's for the best,' said Sophia. 'The future is something we do not need to know.'

'I guess that I agree with Sophia,' said Eva. 'It couldn't possibly be natural to know in advance the moment of one's death.'

'I think that I'm even forgetting that I ever knew,' said Alex.

'Knew what?' Lloyd asked in a vague tone. He turned to Eva and asked, 'Er, what was it that we were forgetting, scrumptious?'

'Oh, I just had it,' she responded somewhat puzzled. 'What was it again, Sophia?'

'What was what?'

3

Ambriel's love for non-telepathic Earth humans was exceptionally strong. It was stronger than that of other Rama. Her love was also different, difficult for an Earthling to understand. The best way it could be described was that it was a kind of hybrid love, like a cross between the kind of love one feels for a pet animal, like a cat or a dog, and the kind of love one feels for one of their own species. Both types of love are strong and real.

Ambriel's love was strong and true. In fact, it was so strong that she married an Earth man and had a son by him. Also, it was the hybrid nature of this love that caused her to selectively erase some memories from their minds. For example, the way she erased the dark memory of the underlying cause of Doyle's bizarre death from Adam and Zeke's minds. Similarly, she erased the memory of their death dates from the Mecca four's minds. She did it because she loved Earth humans and because she knew how damaging such memories could be.

Breakfast was oats with powdered milk and dried fruit. After breakfast they all swallowed a multivitamin capsule, a magnesium pill, 1000mg of vitamin C and a calcium pill.

It would be some time before they needed to worry about their cooking gas supplies. They hadn't actually used much gas as they had been doing most of their cooking over open campfires.

'I was wondering, Lloyd,' said Alex in a comical voice, 'where the hell we were.' He looked westward. 'That coastline looks absolutely featureless. How are we supposed to know where we are?'

'Well, Alex,' said Lloyd after washing down a mouthful of oats with a sip of coffee, 'you see, initially we'll guess our general whereabouts by the old tried and true method of dead reckoning. If we have a chart, and we do, and we know our departure point and speed and direction of travel, we can calculate that at roughly the speed of eight knots, give or take allowing for currents and such, we may estimate that we are traversing more or less seventy nautical miles of the planet every twelve hours. That being so and it being just over twenty-four hours since our departure, we may estimate that we are in the region of 140 nautical miles north of our departure point. By measuring it out on the chart we are able to calculate our general vicinity.'

After breakfast, Lloyd spread the chart out on the dining table in the cabin. Alex sat opposite him. Lloyd retrieved an old-looking, long, narrow wooden box containing his navigation tools, which comprised of a set of dividers, a technical compass, a parallel ruler, a protractor, a number of well-sharpened pencils, a pencil sharpener and an eraser. 'These belonged to my father,' he said nostalgically. 'It's been a while since they've seen the light of day, ever since GPS came along.' After taking some measurements on the chart, he estimated, 'We are a couple of miles out to sea off Laureton, is my best guess.'

'Laureton? I've never heard of it,' said Alex.

'Well, then you haven't spent much time up the coast, have you?'

'No.'

'Laureton is, or should I say, was a very pretty spot, although I doubt that there is anything left of the place now.'

'The tidal wave you think?' said Alex.

'Yes, it swept the whole east coast of Australia down to bedrock.' Lloyd tracked up the coast on the chart with his finger. 'Another fifteen nautical miles north of here and we should be directly off where Port Macquarie used to be.' He tracked further north on the chart. 'About another sixty-five nautical miles north of Port is Coffs Harbor. That is where I would like to anchor tonight.'

'I've been to Coffs Harbor,' said Alex.

'Yes, well, as you can see on the chart here,' Lloyd pointed at a separate detailed drawing of the actual boat harbour of Coffs Harbor, 'there are natural shelters there, like Corambirra Point and Muttonbird Island to the north of it. I am sure that those are still the same, however I doubt if the breakwaters and the man-made harbor within them survived the tidal wave. But even without the breakwaters there should be enough shelter there for us and we should more than likely be okay to go ashore on the beach and camp there overnight.'

5

After Lloyd and Alex finished plotting a course for the day they returned to the cockpit.

'Have you determined our location?' Eva asked.

'Off Laureton, I'm pretty sure,' Lloyd replied.

'I loved Laureton when we were there in the Aston.'

'Yes, so did I,' Lloyd agreed. He announced, 'I shall reset our course to bring us closer to the coast. I thought that we might aim at spending the night in Coffs Harbor. We ought to attempt to get there in time to make camp on the beach. I will try and extract a couple more knots out of the gravity sail to give us some leeway in time.'

Lloyd proceeded to narrow the angle between the 'wings' of the gravity sail, bringing them a few degrees closer to parallel, while Alex read out the boat's speed from the impeller log.

As Mecca sailed northwards, at ten knots now, she drifted closer to land. They began to make out the coastal features much better and once Lloyd recognised one of them, he knew them all from that point on by referring to the chart.

By mid-morning, a moderate northwester sprang up. They were half a mile offshore, just north of Port Macquarie, pushing water off the bow, gravity thrusting at four knots above Mecca's natural hull speed. Lloyd speculated,

'We could be in for a southerly blow tomorrow. It may even arrive during the night. We must seek good shelter for Mecca on the north side of Corumbirra Point. The swell will pick up from the south so we must make sure that we anchor in deep enough water. We must also begin to take note of, and log, the tides.'

'It sounds ominous,' said Alex.

'Well, Alex, we may be a century in the future, but, in reality, we may as well be a century in the past. We have no weather forecasting technology, via satellite, so we are literally sailing blind.' Lloyd's voice expressed some atypical frustration. 'We do not know when exactly to expect the southerly front, nor do we know how strong it will be.'

'We are very confident in your seamanship, sweetheart,' said Eva.

'Oh yes, certainly,' added Sophia.

'I shall have faith in you, Lloyd, even when I'm clinging to a piece of floating debris.'

Everyone broke up with laughter. It was the way Alex said it that was so funny. After the laughter subsided, Lloyd continued,

'Thank you all for your confidence, even Alex, but I am certain that a shipwreck is not on our cards. We have too many things in our favour, like this ruddy gravity sail for example.'

6

Mecca gravity sailed all day in what could best be described as perfect conditions. As the afternoon wore on, the warm northwester turned more westerly, then south-westerly, indicating to Lloyd that the southerly change would arrive sooner than expected, more than likely during the night. He kept a close eye on the conditions, particularly the southern horizon through his binoculars, looking for any visible signs of the coming front.

They made good time and arrived at their destination before sunset. They dropped anchor well in the lee of Corumbirra Point in water deep enough that should a southerly swell rise and bend into their anchorage, the waves would not break but would roll harmlessly beneath the boat.

The western twilight silhouetted the land as the crisp southwester blew offshore pointing Mecca towards the beach some fifty yards away. The surface of the ocean was crystalline glassy as is typical in such conditions. After weighing up the situation, Lloyd decided,

'I think we should stay onboard tonight. There is no knowing how savage this southerly change might be, and I for one would prefer for us all to remain with the boat ready for any sort of emergency. If, for example, she decides to drag anchor, or something, we do not want to be scrambling about on the beach trying to get to her in a gale.'

'Also,' added Alex, 'I'd hate to be battling trying to keep a tent on the ground in a fifty mile per hour buster.'

'Ditto to that,' Eva agreed.

'I shudder at the thought of Alex chasing our tent up the beach with me still in it,' exclaimed Sophia.

Alex declared heroically, 'I would chase that tent to Queensland, dearest, if the situation demanded it.'

.....

Chapter Seventy-Nine

SUNUP RAP

1

Noah did not waste time flying the two ships back to Pinecrest Lake. He wondered if he should have pre-warned Jonesy who was by his lonesome in the small ship. 'Too late now,' he thought.

The two ships shot to ten miles above The Mojave in one second. They darted northward and froze ten miles above Pinecrest Lake in two seconds, then dropped like a stone, actually much faster, and froze one hundred feet above the middle of Pinecrest Lake in another second.

Although there was no one there to hear him, Jonesy uttered a very audible extempore reference to bovine excrement.

The sky to the east was becoming quite bright and it would not be long till sunrise. It was the dawn of *Wednesday 29th September 2123*. Checking out the sleeping camp on the shore of the lake, on his spherical holographic display, Noah noticed a man, he wasn't sure which one, break some twigs and sticks. He watched the man stir the still-glowing embers of the fire from the previous night. The man then placed the twigs and sticks on the embers and before long the fire burst into life. Noah next watched the man place a coffee pot over the flames. 'I'm definitely ready for some of that,' he thought to himself. He noted that the man had not yet noticed the two ships hovering above the lake. Ever so slowly, he brought up the iridescence of the two ships. He then floated them down to the shore just to the north of Melvin and Carla's tent.

For the whole time that Noah was in the transporter ship he refrained from making contact with the floor by maintaining his levitation. He thus stayed free of radioactive contamination. Jonesy was also contaminant free because he never ventured out of Noah's ship.

Before he opened the hatches, Noah thought about the Mojave group possibly contaminating the camp and the lake. He was happy that the majority, if not all, of the high contaminant had been washed off in the waters of Ash Meadows Spring. The majority that was left was the substantially less radioactive desert sand that was stuck to their boots and the horse's hoofs. He considered

that ideally these should be washed, however not in the lake because it provided the group's drinking water. They should be washed in something like a bucket, miles away from the camp in some inaccessible spot. He realised that he would have to perform that task himself while levitating. The bucket should then be left behind. As well, the interior of the transporter ship should be swept out clean of the desert sand residue, as best as possible, in the same place far away from the camp.

Noah understood that the radioactivity of the sand was quite low grade, not really representing any danger over a short period, however he nonetheless did not want to take any risks of anyone accidentally ingesting some. He turned to the group in the transporter, who was still visibly blown away by the experience they were having, and spoke to them in a soft, reassuring voice.

'I am going to open the hatch in a minute, however I would appreciate it if you all stayed put for a while until we can wash your boots in a bucket of water or some such thing. You may stand on the lowered ramp, that would be OK, but please do not step off the ramp onto the ground. The same goes for Fury. If you girls could control him, please.'

'We shall do as you say, Noah,' said Fin.

'Thank you, Noah,' said Tip with gratitude in her voice.

'Yes, thank you,' added Griffin with a hint of discomfort in his voice.

'That is very good, and all shall be well. I shall go and speak to the group on the ground and explain to them how we found you. Jonesy shall join me. I would not be surprised if some of the group come to greet you, especially the children. They are very friendly and will show you much kindness I'm sure. Please resist the temptation to step off the ramp.

'We will do as you say, Noah,' said Fin reassuringly.

2

That morning, it was Ace, the helicopter pilot, who was first up and about tending to the communal campfire. Under normal circumstances it would have been Jonesy's task as he always liked to rise before the sun.

Ace failed to notice, in the predawn semi-darkness, the two softly-glowing, almond-shaped discs silently hovering about a hundred feet above the centre of the lake. His attention was tightly focussed on breathing life back into the fading

embers of the previous night's fire. He failed to notice as the two discs, one much larger than the other, began to glow brighter and slowly descend towards the water. He even did not see them come to a levitating stop one foot above the shore of the lake and about fifty yards beyond Melvin's tent.

Melvin was next to rise. He was awakened by the sound of breaking sticks, which he immediately recognised as someone tending to the fire.

'Don't get up yet, hon,' Carla pleaded to no avail.

He kissed her tenderly and said, 'You stay restin, chile, and I'll be bringin you a nice hot cup of coffee.' He kissed her again then turned and poked his head out from their tent. He looked right and saw Ace tending to the fire. Then he instinctively looked left. His jaw dropped and hung limp for a second as his half-asleep brain attempted to compute the meaning of the fantastic sight virtually right next to their camp. After a moment of paralysed entrancement, he turned his head the other way and whisper-called-out to Ace who had his back to both him and the incredible vision beyond him.

'Hay Ayce ... haaaay Ayce!'

Ace immediately turned around and froze on the spot at seeing the two levitating space ships. He tried to whisper back, but he choked on the words.

Melvin crawled out of his tent and walked over to the now flickering campfire. 'There's two of em,' he whispered suspiciously.

'Who do you think they are?' said Ace.

'Might be Jonesy in the small one,' said Melvin.

'Look at the size of the other one,' Ace observed.

'Yeah, it's bigger than a barn. Wonder what it's doin here?'

They both walked towards the two levitating ships. As they approached, they noticed a hatch open in each space ship and lower as a ramp. The hatches opened in unison. Ace and Melvin stood transfixed as they peered into the softly-lit interiors. They immediately saw Jonesy emerge from the small one and Noah float out of the large one. They next observed wide-eyed as a huge black stallion, restrained by two beautiful young girls, appeared near the entrance of the larger ship. Behind them was a young man.

'Who are they?' whispered Melvin.

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Ace replied.

They turned their heads as they heard a resounding 'Holy guacamole' bellow from the main camp.

'Me thinks Snake's up,' said Ace.

'No doubt,' Melvin concurred.

Jonesy didn't waste any time getting off the ship. He hopped off the end of the lowered ramp into the lush green grass on the bank of the lake. He took a deep breath.

'Beautiful cool air up here,' he declared. 'I ain't been off that dang ship since we left.'

Snake walked over. 'Hiya, Jonesy, who's your pals?'

Before Jonesy got a chance to answer, Noah began to speak. The sun was just poking above the ridge to the east. It lit his face in a golden glow. He began telling them about the reconnaissance. 'We encountered radiation levels highly unsuitable for life,' he said with a tone of urgency. 'The whole desert is contaminated. Some parts are much worse than others. I am beginning to have doubts whether long-term healthy life is even feasible virtually anywhere on the North American continent. There may be pockets that are OK, like here, but basically radiation is everywhere and it will be just a matter of time before people become poisoned. You see, there will be no knowing where the animals you will hunt for food had been or what they had eaten. Over one hundred nuclear power plants have melted down and spewed their poison all over the place.'

Noah paused for a moment. Everyone could see that he was becoming upset. He regathered his emotions and continued. He introduced the trio from the desert and the horse, still quarantined in the big ship, to the men of the camp. He then explained how they needed to be washed down of any remaining radioactive contaminant so as not to spread it around the camp. He explained how he intended to do that. He then explained that he needed to take Griffin to Rama for specialised treatment for his radiation poisoning. 'I need to do this urgently as time is short,' he stressed. He whispered the last part because he wished not to alarm Griffin or the two girls. The men got the message. Noah turned his head towards the fire and asked, 'Is that coffee I smell?'

'Valhalla Java,' said Snake. 'I got two hundred kilos of the stuff. You know your coffee, Noah?'

Noah smiled a knowing smile and coolly replied, 'Enough to know that you know yours.'

'I'll pour you a cup,' said Ace.

3

Pretty soon the rest of the camp arose to the new day. They were all astonished at the sight of the two levitating ships. They all gathered together as Noah introduced them to Griffin, Fin, Tip and Fury.

As he drank his coffee, Noah asked Snake if he had a bucket and a broom. Snake found the items stored away in the back of the shipping container.

Over the next couple of hours Noah flew the desert survivors to a distant place where he washed them down with water and swept out the interior of the transporter ship. He then returned to the camp where everyone was safely able to exit the ship and join the camp's community. Unfortunately, Griffin, Tip and Fin needed to be fully covered by their clothing to protect their sensitive skins from the daylight. Everyone, particularly the kids, was completely enraptured by Fury who delighted in all the attention.

4

The whole group sat around the main fire and listened, open mouthed, as Griffin told the tale of his and the girls' escape from the base. Right in the middle of the best part of the story, Noah interjected,

'We shall have to leave soon, Griffin.'

Tip and Fin looked at Noah through their shaded facemasks. Fin spoke apprehensively,

'We must go with you as well, Noah. We can't be parted from Griff.'

'I won't go without the girls,' Griffin announced somewhat defiantly. The girls bundled up tightly against him.

'Oh great, a mutiny,' exclaimed Noah bemused. 'Well, as much as I would love to accommodate you, I am afraid that it is physically impossible. My ship is small and two is the most it can carry. Besides, the people we will be attempting to visit are very secretive and illusive and I am afraid that as a larger group we may not find them at all because they will avoid us. Even as a duo we shall be extremely lucky to succeed in our quest. As much as I regret it, you girls will have to stay.'

Lori, Jonesy's wife, came over to them and placed her arms around them.

'We'll take good care of you while you wait for Griffin's return,' she reassured them, 'and we are keener than keen to hear more of your amazing story.'

Everyone around the fire audibly agreed with her.

Thus, it was decided that Fin and Tip would stay at the Pinecrest camp for the duration of Griffin's absence.

Once that business was over, Noah had another sip of his coffee and turned to Snake. Everyone in the camp listened intently to the conversation.

'I have thought about this for a while, Snake,' he began.

Snake looked at the alien directly in the eyes, like chief to chief, and calmly uttered, 'Hit me with both barrels, Noah.'

'OK, well, you already know that the whole western half of California has sunk beneath the sea ...'

Jonesy couldn't contain himself anymore.

'Yeah, Snake, from Sanfran to Mexico, to the foothills of the Sierra, is all gone. The Central Valley is part of the ocean now.'

'But that is not the worst of it,' added Noah.

Snake's eyes bulged with amazement and his jaw hung limp. 'That's not the worst of it?'

'What's the worst of it?' asked Trixie in a faltering voice.

Jonesy couldn't help himself. 'The worst of it,' he said in a most dramatic, emotional voice, 'is that the whole damn country is off-the-scale radioactive.'

'Yes,' Noah nodded his head, 'I couldn't have put it more succinctly myself. In fact, the way I see it, life in America is over for about a million years, give or take a couple of thousand. My estimation is primarily based on the half-life of plutonium.'

'What, do you mean here?' asked Ludwig referring to the Pinecrest camp.

'I suspect everywhere.' Noah replied.

'So, you think'

'That's affirmative, Snake, I think your group will need to be relocated, either to Australia, New Zealand or Tasmania. We are setting up a settlement in a place called Noosa on the east coast of Australia. It's really nice there and it will

be a good place from which to explore all those other locations. You are the other reason I borrowed the transporter ship from a friend of a friend. I thought to leave it here while I took Griffin to Rama. When we return, we can then focus on your relocation, if of course that is agreeable to you. Nothing is compulsory. You are free to do as you wish. I am simply happy to help any way I can.'

Little did any of them realise that Noah could have telepathically manipulated their minds any which way he wished if he had chosen to. From the Raman perspective, non-telepathic Earthlings had absolutely no free will whatsoever.

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Chapter Eighty
MISSION OF MERCY

1

It was mid-morning on *Wednesday 30th September 2123*. Tip and Fin cried as Griffin and Noah entered Noah's intergalactic cruiser. Griffin's weakness of movement was plainly apparent.

'Good luck,' Trixie called out.

Everyone mumbled 'good luck', or something to that effect. They began to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Some of them even understood the life or death nature of the mission Noah was undertaking and that it was quite possible that they would never see young Griffin again.

As they watched the hatch close, they were amazed at how quickly and how much they took a liking to Griffin and the girls. Also, as they thought about these things, a realisation of what the young trio represented began to dawn on them. These three kids were the last survivors of the human race that did not have the benefit of alien time travel technology. These three had to do it the hard way. They had to pass through the extinction level event and then survive, through five generations, in some deep underground rat hole. Then one hundred years later, as the life support machinery began to fail, they had to find a way out and escape to the surface. And out of eight billion people, only three remained, not counting the time shifters. In awe they realised at that moment that these three kids were very special indeed. Noah realised it way back in the Mojave Desert. That is why he would have done anything to save Griffin's life, a life threatened by the stupidity of his ancestors. That thought, in Noah's mind, was always accompanied by a small wave of anger.

Once in the ship, Griffin removed his backpack. He pulled the hood off his head and the facemask from his face. He did not need these inside the ship because the light was subdued enough for his sensitive skin and eyes to handle.

'The light in here is very similar to that in the base,' he informed Noah.

He stored his facemask into his pack and retrieved his NASA cap, which he placed on his head. He then secured the backpack in a storage pocket on the side of the inner hull where Noah suggested.

'It's nice to see your face,' said Noah.

'It's a relief to get the mask off,' Griffin replied.

The silver ship rose into the sky not making a sound. When it rose to well above the treetops it shot upward and out of sight like it had got shot out of a cannon. It seemed to disappear in less than a millisecond. Had the Pinecrest group been able to see it, they would have seen it come to a stop, after one second, roundabout fifty-thousand feet above the surface of the moon.

2

'This is the moon,' Noah said as casual as can be. He then turned the ship around. 'And that is where we came from.'

'It's round,' said Griffin almost too unamazed.

'Er, that's affirmative,' replied Noah.

Noah's immediate intent was to probe into the nature of Griffin's perception of reality. He fully understood that two people may be looking at exactly the same thing but be seeing something completely different. It all depended on their history of experience. Every new experience was put up against the bank of memories one carried within him. And the perception, translation if you like, of the experience was totally dependent on prior experiences. Noah needed to know where Griffin was at, mentally speaking. He figured that he should get the basic gist of it by the time they made it to Rama, about one hour away in terms of time.

It became evident to Noah that Griffin's total lack of dismay at arriving at the moon in just under one second was due to the fact that everything was new to him. He didn't know how long it should take. He had no idea what was normal because, Noah realised now, Griffin's whole universe, for virtually all his life, was a hole in the ground. So, because everything was new to him, he cleverly adapted to it by accepting that it was all as it should be. Noah looked at Griffin's face. He noticed that it remained completely nonplussed, calmly observing the floating spheres rendered perfectly on the holographic display. He thought nothing about his massless state either, or the velocity of flight, or anything else. Griffin simply existed in a subdued state of wonderment where nothing was amazing because everything was amazing.

'Tell me, Griffin,' Noah asked, 'did you know anything of the world above while you were underground?'

Griffin calmly turned to Noah and looked him square in the eyes. To Noah the look and demeanour of his young companion was far too much like that of a wiser, older man, not that of a seventeen-year-old kid. Noah's impression was not only derived through the physical plane but the mind plane as well.

'No one knew anything of it,' Griffin replied. 'Some of us, a few of us, only heard myths which were read to us as children from RG3s journal. We were read incredible tales of sky and wind and sun and moon and stars. We heard of trees and animals. You cannot imagine how enchanted we were as children listening to those myths, although we didn't ever really completely believe in them, not at first. They were just too ...' Griffin searched for a word, 'fantastic.' He continued, 'We were told of a world above where there was no ceiling. We couldn't even imagine that. All we ever knew, all our lives, was ceiling, you see Noah, and we were told that the sky, the great nothing, went on forever. Even the word was foreign, how much more the concept. There was no such thing as forever in the base and the base was our whole world, from birth to death.' Emotion began to creep into Griffin's voice. Noah asked,

'Are you talking about RG3, the quarterback who became president?'

'The very one as I have been told. He was my grand, grand, grand, grandfather, give or take a grand. That last part has been a running gag for as long as I can remember. He wrote the journal and kept it secret. It was passed from father to son until it got to me. I am now its custodian. I have it here. It's in my backpack over there.' Griffin pointed to his pack in the storage pocket.

'May I see it?' Noah requested.

'Sure,' said Griffin. He floated out of his seat and retrieved the journal from the pack. 'Wow, I feel like nothing,' he observed.

'That is the feeling of being massless. Er, don't try to understand what I just said except that it's part of how we travel, that's all.'

Griffin returned to his seat and handed Noah the old journal. 'It's a hundred years old,' he said, 'so please be careful with it.'

'Believe me, Griffin, I and my people shall revere this document more than you.'

Griffin looked deeply into Noah's iridescent, almost-shining, eyes. In an apologetic, but assertive tone, he said,

'I cannot let you keep it. It is to stay in my possession until I give it to my firstborn son.'

'Oh, of course, of course, Griffin, I ... we ... would never ... may I have a quick glance through it?'

'Sure.'

Noah turned some pages. 'It's handwritten,' he observed full of veneration.

'Yes.'

'And there are drawings.'

'It was kept secret from everyone in the base, especially the military.'

'Really? Oh, look here ... a poem.' Noah read,

*'It matters not
What is going on
It matters not
If the road is short or long
It's even not important
If we are weak or strong
As long as we remember
And accept with grace
That His will be done
And that the road of truth
Will lead us home'*

'That is truly beautiful, Griffin. Your grandfather, many times over, seems to have been a man of faith. I can sense his strength of spirit even now.'

'Yes, well, we certainly still love and revere our dear grandfather, all our grandfathers. Without them and the journal we would have never, even remotely, imagined the surface, or anything else beyond the base. Everyone in the base, except for Rip's family and my family, believed that the base was all there had ever been, all there was and all there ever would be. The true knowledge died out before I was born. In the end, RG3's journal remained the last and only link to the truth.'

'Did the military know about the surface?' Noah asked.

'It's hard to say. Maybe some of the top Ranks knew, but I doubt if the regulars knew. There must have been secret documents buried away in their archives.'

'I wouldn't be surprised,' said Noah. 'And tell me, you mentioned that the equipment was failing when you escaped.'

'Yes. You see the twin's father was a very sought-after maintenance man because he was so competent at his job. He really understood the state of the life-support machinery, and he told us that it was all falling apart. That is why he prepared us and sent us in search of the way out of the base and up to the surface. Even that word, the surface, did not exist in the language generally spoken in the base. It just did not exist. We only found it in RG3s journal.'

Emotion filled Noah's heart as he listened and attempted to imagine what a hundred years deep underground, with no known way out, could possibly feel like. He closed the journal and handed it back to Griffin.

'One day,' he said very respectfully, 'when things settle down and life becomes routine, we would like to copy it, but always in your presence. I promise you this one thing, Griffin, no one will ever attempt to take this precious thing from you.'

'Thank you, Noah.'

Griffin replaced the journal in his pack.

For a brief moment, Noah had forgotten that Griffin's life hung by a thread. The overwhelming urgency and priority of the mission re-focused itself in Noah's mind as he watched him awkwardly return to his seat.

A lime-green X suddenly popped up pretty much dead center of the screen. It represented the distant location of Rama. Noah looked at it and said,

'It's a two-stage process from here, Griffin, sub-G to the outer limits of your solar system, then G to the outer limits of ours.'

'What is G, Noah?'

'It is the speed of light squared, which happens to be the velocity of a gravity particle. Double Dutch? Don't worry, I'll sit down with you one day and try to explain some of these things. Basically, G is the cosmic speed limit, as we understand things at the moment. In terms of gravity sailing, which is what we do, G is as fast as we can go.'

'Double Dutch? What is double Dutch?' Griffin queried.

'Oh, that's right, for you there was no surface, therefore no countries. Do you know what country means?'

'I've never heard the word,' Griffin replied.

'Not even from the journal?'

'No.'

'Hmm,' Noah speculated, 'I suspect that RG3 might have dreamed about a world with no countries, so he avoided the word altogether in order to not introduce the concept. He would have been pleased with us, I think, because that is what we have on Rama, no countries and no governments. Everyone takes care of themselves, and each other.'

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Chapter Eighty-One
THE DELPHIAN FOREST

1

Rion was a sailor. He, like all the other sailing folk, lived on the coast. He sailed a huge catamaran, about forty-five feet long, incorporating a cantilevered, dual-wing design. The cat's shallow draft made her perfect for sailing amongst the profuse shallow reefs to the north of where he lived. If he ever needed to, like for example if he needed to navigate close to dangerous reefs, he could drop the wings, they folded up like macramé, engage either or both of the gravity sails embedded in the twin sterns of the hulls and have precise telepathic control of his boat.

Rion lived about fifteen-hundred kilometres north of the Eos valley. A thousand kilometres of desert separated the southern alpine region from the northern subtropical region. The desert coast ended abruptly in tall, vertical, ocean cliffs. When ocean swells smashed into the cliffs, they rebounded with almost equal force back to sea. This caused a confused ocean and extremely unpleasant sailing. Because of this, and despite the fact that there were many sailing folk living on both sides of the great desert, not many crossed it. Thus, the two cultures evolved along divergent lines. This was well exemplified in the differing designs of their sailboats.

The sailing folk of Rama kept a dinghy strapped to the decks of their boats. Unlike dinghies on Earth, which were the size of rowboats and were mostly towed behind the main vessel, Raman dinghies flew. They were mostly open, dish shaped, and they typically incorporated a couple of seats and a small cargo area in the rear. Their mode of propulsion was gravitational and their mode of control was telepathic. They were usually made custom fitted to the shape of the sailboat so they were secure on deck and offered little wind resistance.

The dinghies rarely flew faster than around two hundred miles per hour. They incorporated clear, flip-up windscreens in their designs and the occupants often wore tight-fitting flying caps and goggles, all for the wind, which, by the way, they loved. They generally kept a social circle not much farther than about an hour flying time in the dinghy.

Rion lived with his wife Sattva. They lived in the southern part of the subtropical zone. The Great Reef began less than fifty miles up the coast. They lived in a beautiful, timber, levitation house, located just inside a sandy river-mouth, adjacent to a pristine beach.

Semi-attached to the house was a jetty where the boat lived. At the rear of the house was a stone stairway that led to a garage in the side of a cliff. It was a perfectly excavated, rectangular hole in the rock wall. Rion parked his space ship, as well as his dinghy, in the garage. Behind the parked vehicles, along the rear wall, Rion had his workshop.

Rion's many escapades, particularly in his youth, had him making friends all over the place. He found Maximillian, the sailsmith, and made his acquaintance. He had also spent much time sailing north into the tropics. He explored the upper reaches of the revered Mystic River, which, to his stupefaction, more than lived up to its name. It led him deep into the ancient Delphian Forest. The colossal trees that grew there were thousands of years old. Their lives spanned many generations of the Rama and every elder of the trees had a sacred name.

The deeper Rion sailed up the snaking Mystic the more otherworldly it became. He was entering the land of The Ilf, the people that lived like birds, in trees, and just flew around everywhere. They did not reach out for anyone and were nourished by the abundance of the forest that surrounded them. Rion befriended one during one of his explorations. An Ilf male, called Saek, approached Rion out of admiration for the pleasing design of his vessel. He flew over the water and cautiously approached the boat. He sensed a tranquil man. He appeared in Rion's mind as the head of a Sparrowhawk. Rion was used to such introductions. Realities entering realities was the telepathic language. When two people met from different places telepathy often remained the only form of communication. Luckily, as it turned out, Rion and Saek did not have such problems. Their languages were both derived from the same core tongue. They just spoke with extremely different accents and there were a few uncommon words.

Saek pointed to himself and said 'Hello, I be Saek.'

Rion pointed to himself and said, 'And I am Rion.'

And thus, a friendship began, as well as a trading alliance.

Saek wanted to know where Rion was from and what he was doing there. Rion told him that he was exploring. 'I love the adventure,' he said. He also told him that he was a trader of valued things. Saek told Rion that skins were very valued by the Ilf. Skins were the body-hugging, levitation suits that were controlled telepathically. Then he said that he could trade Fish for skins. Fish was extremely valued by all Rama and only the Ilf knew how to make it. Well, Rion *was* a trader. Although he had dabbled in a variety of desirable goods through the years, he eventually settled into the skins for Fish trade with the Ilf through Saek. He procured the skins from Ada and Max, the Sailsmiths of the Eos Valley, and exchanged them for Fish.

The Ilf ordered their special kind of skins. They had their own particular style of flying that favoured the prone position, so they ordered the skins with modified flying controls, all telepathic of course.

Rion was always well received at the Sailsmith's house where he often enjoyed his hosts' hospitality for a number of days. He tended to fly to the Eos, because it was easier, but he always sailed to the Mystic because that way he could approach the Ilf from beneath. Ilf, like birds, were wary of anything approaching from above.

A visit with Saek was a complete immersion within the Ilf way of life. Rion found them to be particularly young at heart. He wore his skin the whole time he was there. They flew from tree to tree and Saek showed him many sacred places. They swam in pools and sipped syrupy nectars from a variety of exotic flowers. They slept in his tree house at night, high in the canopy of the elder named Valder.

And in the candle light in the evenings, the Ilf played their musical instruments and sang, and their harmonies imbued the whole forest. The singing was interspersed with the smoking of sacred herbs and fungi.

The forest became a veritable wonderland, for Rion, under the influence of a sacred mushroom named Midnight Light.

2

Noah originally met Rion at the Sailsmith's house. He had never met anyone who knew as much about the Ilf as Rion. One time, during their many conversations, Rion told Noah about Mimo, the wise woman of the Ilf. 'She is a

revered healer,' he said, 'and a mystery within a mystery. I have never met her, but I know someone who knows her.'

Noah's friendship with Rion created a strong mind thread between them, strong enough for him to contact Rion from the Mojave Desert and plead for help with a young hero's survival.

Rion got the message, about Griffin, out to Mimo, via Saek and another Ilf. A return message soon came. Mimo agreed to help and invited them to come as soon as possible.

3

It was arranged that they would meet up at Rion's house. Noah and Griffin glided the intergalactic cruiser only feet above the water as they approached. They came in for a hover landing over the beach right next to the house. They saw Rion and Sattva waving to them from the veranda.

'It's my first time in your house, Rion,' said Noah, warmly shaking Rion's hand.

'Yes, we usually bump into each other at Max's house.' Rion turned toward Griffin and guessed, 'Aha, this must be the patient.'

'Griffin,' replied Griffin offering a feeble handshake.

After all the introductions were over, the travellers from Earth settled into Rion's house. The plan was to leave for Mystic River first thing in the morning.

After dinner, they discussed the journey ahead.

'Two days sailing up the coast and three navigating the Mystic,' explained Rion. 'Five, maybe six days travel before we get there.'

Noah glanced at Griffin whose complexion was visibly fading. 'That might be too long,' he said. 'I remember you telling me that no one flies into the Ilf world. No one approaches from above. You mentioned that the best approach is from below via the Mystic River. I am not certain that we have the luxury of five days, Rion. We ought to try to get there by tomorrow night.'

'We could try it in the dinghy,' said Rion enthusiastically. 'It'd take longer than the ship, but it is small and discrete, and much faster than sailing. In it we can get to the Mystic River in about six hours. And you can double that for the up-river portion. We could fly a foot above the water all the way up the river. I don't

think that should fray too many Ilf feathers. We basically need to come in low and do it quietly.'

Noah declared, 'That is it then, we go in Rion's dinghy.'

The dinghy was parked in the garage. It floated about six inches off the floor.

'It's quite small and open,' said Noah.

'A negligible squeeze,' Rion replied comically. He suggested, 'Griffin can take the passenger seat and you, Noah, can hang on for dear life in the back.'

'That is quite acceptable to me,' said Noah. 'How does it sit with you, Griffin?'

'Er, no problemo, Noah,' Griffin courageously replied.

'It will be best, I think, Noah, if we wear our skins,' suggested Rion.

'Certainly. I have mine,' Noah replied.

They kicked back after dinner and swapped a few pipes of Mana.

The Mana continued to suppress the effects of radiation poisoning in Griffin.

4

They decided to leave at midnight. They dispensed with sleep and instead made ready the dinghy for the trip. By Rion's calculations they figured that they should reach their destination by sunset the next day, although they didn't know precisely where that destination was. Their initial plan was to visit Saek on the way.

They prepared themselves for 200mph flight in an open-topped dinghy.

Even though they left in the middle of the night, their flight was not too chilly. They departed from the southern part of the subtropical zone and flew north into the tropical zone.

There are no seasons on Rama, there are just five climatic zones. They are the tropical, the subtropical, the desert, the alpine and the polar. The tropical zone is vast because it straddles the equator. South and north of the two subtropical zones are two desert zones, which ring the planet. North and south of the desert zones are the alpine zones, which are chiefly responsible for the deserts. North and south of the alpine zones are the polar zones. The reason that Rama has stable, clearly differentiated, climatic zones, and lacks any seasons, is because the plane of Rama's axis of spin matches the plane of its orbital axis. There is no tilt of the axis, as in Earth's situation where there is a tilt of some 23 degrees, this tilt causing the seasons.

5

They flew above the treetops as fast as they could. Noah hung on in the back. He used his levitation suit for assistance. There was only one moon visible that night. The other was on the opposite side of the planet. The solitary moon, named Maya, reflected enough light to lift the highlights out of the darkness. Their goggles did the rest.

Five hours after departing they came to the Mystic rivermouth. They flew most of the way following the coastline at about four hundred feet. Rion descended the dinghy to a few feet above the water and said,

'This is the entrance to the Mystic, Noah. From here we stay low. Everyone OK?'

'Yes, certainly.' 'Er, no problemo,' came the replies.

'It's like a long snake, this river,' Rion explained.

They took a moment to revel in the sunrise.

'Ohh, I love that early morning warmth after sunrise,' said Noah.

'Sometimes I long for it after a cold night,' Rion added.

Griffin didn't speak much because he had nothing much to say.

'I'll fly as fast as is comfortable, to start with,' Rion went on, 'however I'll slow down when we begin to think it might be a good idea.'

The sleek dinghy silently skimmed up the center of the river barely a foot above the water. Rion banked the dinghy around the bends like an aeroplane keeping the occupants inside fairly neutral. They sped along at between forty and eighty miles per hour.

As they ventured west, deeper into the ancient Delphian Forest, everything became larger. Trees with one-hundred-foot diameter trunks grew in there. They were so tall that one couldn't see their branches for other foliage. The trunks just disappeared into the green. These most ancient of all trees were called elders. Beneath them were strata of different, smaller trees and palms and every type of plant imaginable.

They snaked up the Mystic all morning until they arrived at Valder, the elder tree within whose branches Saek lived in his tree house.

They negotiated their way around and up the side of the enormous trunk. It was not until they rose above the forest canopy that they got a sight of Valder's

crown high above in the sky. The only other things at that altitude were other elder trees. They were liberally distributed throughout the forest for as far as the eye could see.

Saek greeted them warmly and offered food and drink during their brief stay.

They sat on a veranda perched amongst the high branches and admired the view. Saek pointed out the neighboring elders. 'That be Vulk,' he said, 'and that one over there be Evert. We that live up here be called the high folk. We build treehouses for protection from the high winds that be often howlin up here.'

The high winds were not due to trade winds. They were due to the huge thunderstorms that rampaged around the tropical zone every afternoon.

'The forest folk that be livin down there,' Saek pointed down at the forest canopy, 'they like livin in nests. Cosy, if you be partial to that sort of thing.'

After a little bit of chitchat, Saek offered some final recommendations.

'Just be followin the river upstream and be takin your time. It be not so far. You be there fore sunset. I been told of Mimo's granddaughter, her name be Hether, and that she be lookin out for you. She be findin you for sure and be guidin you to Mimo.'

It was not long after midday when they said goodbye to Saek and descended through the maze of branches that was the forest canopy. They joined the river and silently continued on their journey upstream into the deepest and most mysterious part of the Delphian Forest.

6

'Er, please be excusin me,' said the slender Ilf girl as she flew up to the dinghy, 'I be Hether.'

Her skin-tight levitation suit fluoresced in a flowing pattern of red, green and yellow Lorikeet feathers. Her balaclava and goggles, which regrettably concealed her friendly smile, were beautifully telepathically rendered in the head of what most closely resembled the Papuan Lorikeet, *Charmosyna papou*, on Earth. Her head was mostly varying shades of vivid reds with a band of black running around the back and a small white crown on top. Her appearance was positively stunning.

'Be you the three who wish guidance to Mimo?' she asked in a voice that sounded like flowing honey.

'We be they, m'lady,' Rion replied speaking in the Ilf dialect. 'I be Rion from the southern latitudes, in the back be Noah, from the Eos Valley, and the passenger here be Griffin, from the planet Earth, he bein the patient.'

'Been you journeyin well?' she asked.

'Briskly, m'lady, briskly.'

'Ah, we must not be delayin then,' she said getting ready to fly off. 'If you be likin to follow me, it be not far.'

They flew through the emerald forest. Everything radiated a subdued glow in the totally filtered light. As they ventured upstream, the terrain became steeper and the river narrower and swifter. Gradually they began to hear a roaring sound. The volume grew into sustained thunder as they got closer. They turned a bend and flew into a gargantuan, mist-saturated, cathedral-like space that was spectacularly pierced by sabres of light where the suns' rays penetrated the broken canopy. At the far end of this voluminous void was a three-hundred-foot-high waterfall, which was surrounded by a profusion of every kind of incredibly lush tropical plant.

'This be Mimo's waterfall,' said Hether glistening in the mist. 'She be livin not far upriver from here.'

They saw her levitating in one of the light beams. The drops that had collected all over her skin refracted an aura of thousands of rainbows. To them she looked like a glowing angel.

They were all getting drenched but no one minded because it was a very warm afternoon. Hether led them up the falls, through the mist and thunder, and over the top. The river was quieter up there on the plateaux. They glided upstream, skimming just above the now mirror surface.

As they rounded a bend they came into a cove. They spotted a jetty, up ahead, projecting out from a narrow beach.

'That be Mimo's place,' said Hether pointing. 'She be livin in the wood not far from there.'

Tied to the jetty was a low, round boat, of sorts, with a dome cover that appeared to be made of some sort of canvas. The colors and textures of the boat and jetty were that of their surroundings, completely blending into the forest.

Mimo lived in the deep woods where none but filtered light existed. The nearest direct sunlight was downriver at the falls. The falls area had always been one of Mimo's favourite swimming places. The other was a small rockpool in a brook nearby. The Ilf loved to take swims, which, by the way, they always did naked.

Due to the lack of direct light, the forest floor was not so thickly vegetated that one could not easily get about. They came to a clearing at the base of a colossus of a tree. It was the elder of all elders, Arak. Arak was so old and tall that his trunk at its base divided into three parts for better support. Mimo lived in a stone cottage snuggled in the trifurcation of the huge roots. She had been living there for over a thousand years. The stones that made up the walls of the cottage were of varying sizes and fitted together like jigsaw pieces with such precision that a razor blade wouldn't have fitted between them. They were dry stacked with no mortar between them. Near the ground they were covered with fine green moss. There were also small spindly mushrooms growing from the joins. There were two main types. There were tiny yellow ones with fluorescent purple stripes. These grew in clumps. There were also shiny red ones with raised yellow spots. These grew alone. The windows of the cottage were rectangular and had no glass. Instead they had wooden shutters that opened outward. The roof of the cottage, what they could see of it, appeared to be made of what appeared like pieces of large turtle shell.

They parked the dinghy out of the way in a nook. As they set foot to ground, they removed their balaclavas and goggles and let them hang behind their necks. There was a momentary deeper than usual meeting of Hether and Noah's eyes. She shyly broke the contact, looking away towards Mimo's cottage, and smiled in Mimo's mind as was the fashion amongst telepaths.

They watched the ancient wooden door open with a long squeak.

Mimo stood inside, smiling. 'It be doin that when it be curious,' she quipped referring to the squeaking door.

'Hello, nana, I be findin them.'

Mimo was known for her advanced age. She was 1377 years old, a rarity for a Rama, and she could remember every day of that long life down to the last detail. She looked a woman of about 60 Earth years. She was not too tall, about five-seven, had long white hair and pale, smooth skin, and her cerulean eyes burned fiercely with the light of a very advanced telepath. She wore a simple, knee-length dress made of finely woven linen-like material made from a plant not dissimilar to the flaxseed plant on Earth. She was barefoot.

'Foreigners be rare in these parts,' she said.

'Thank you for receiving us, m'lady,' said Rion respectfully, bowing his head.

'The boy with you,' she looked into Griffin's eyes, 'he be the qualmish one?'

'Yes, thank you, m'lady. His name be Griffin, from the planet Earth, from our neighboring galaxy, the Milky Way they call it.'

'I be hearin little of it,' said Mimo.

'Griffin been found by Noah here, kind lady, in a desert on that planet.'

She looked at Noah, 'Where be you from then, Noah?'

'My lady, mostly I dwell in the vicinity of the Eos Valley when I am not roaming about.'

'And why be this young boy's life so important that you be bringin him all that way to me?' asked Mimo.

'He and his two younger friends are the last true survivors of their species of some eight billion people,' Noah replied.

'Hmm, I see,' she said. 'Your cause then be indeed righteous and your mission of noble mercy,' she paused, then added, 'and it be certainly worthy of my ministrations.' She looked Noah deeply in the eye and pronounced, 'You know, Noah, without true virtue there can be no healin. You be already the beginnin of that process.'

'Thank you maam,' said Noah.

'Griffin be not telepathic,' she observed.

'No maam,' said Noah.

'The fish be not easy for him.'

'Aye maam.'

'Yet, he be as limpid as the sacred pool of the Mystic spring. This be in his favor,' she added.

Griffin struggled to stand up straight. He was beginning to experience waves of abdominal cramps. His face grimaced with pain. Suddenly, to everyone's surprise, he collapsed to the ground.

'Oh my,' said Mimo with concern in her voice.

Noah, who was as strong as an ox, bent down and effortlessly picked Griffin's listless body up in his arms.

'Please be bringin him inside, Noah,' said Mimo, 'I must be makin him a brew.'

Mimo's brews were legendary. There was no knowing how many she had concocted through the centuries. They were all made from plants and roots and mushrooms of the forest, and each one had a special purpose. Although her brews were fabled, they were not as renowned as her personal variety of Fish.

7

Noah laid Griffin on a bunk in a rear corner of the living room.

The interior of Mimo's cottage was made up of only two rooms. There was a front room, which doubled as a guest room and incorporated a small kitchen. The other room was in the rear. It was her bedroom and it was always hidden behind a closed door. No one ever went in there. The floor was covered in soft, woven, river reed. The wooden window shutters remained open most of the time allowing sufficient light inside. Mimo's furniture was old and simple, made of intricately-carved wood. The interior was also decorated with many exotic potted plants. At night the plants fluoresced with a light as intense as the full moon on Earth.

Mimo, like all Ilf, spent much of her time flitting about the forest occupying herself with pleasant foods, friends and exotic entheogens. She spent most of the rest of her time in a trance, Buddha like, traversing the infinite verisimilitude of the mind plane. She also played an instrument, which could best be described as a seven-string balalaika, and she sang ancient songs in soft, sweet melodies. All Ilf that ever lived had a song written about them when they died. That way they were remembered for evermore through their being sung by their descendants. And so it was with Mimo, who in the evenings sang her ancestral songs in a magical harmony with all the other Ilf in the forest.

'I be needin him for three days,' she said boiling some water on a plate made hot by friction of two flat ironstones counter-spun by tiny gravity sails.

Noah looked at Griffin, who lay there pale and semi-conscious, and expressed his concern.

'What are his chances do you think, Mimo?'

'How he be gettin this way then?' she asked.

'He swallowed some very radioactive salt.'

'Been he vomitin?'

'Vomiting till there was nothing left to vomit. He must be cleaned out by now,' Noah assessed. 'I've been pumping him with fluids, keeping him from drying out, and he's been smoking Mana since I found him.'

'So, it good chance be that all the damagin salt is out. I be able to see in the Fish. If it all out then it be not impossible to save him. If still some poison in him, then it be not lookin good. Other-be-wise the Fish be allowin the Motherflow to do the healin of what been damaged, if we be not too late.'

'How long before we know?'

'It be takin maybe three days, maybe more ... or maybe it be too late.'

At that moment she solemnly closed her eyes and placed her hands over her heart and sang,

*'No one be knowin
Only the Mother flowin
When we be comin
When we be goin
When we be hidin
When we be showin
No one be knowin
Only the Mother flowin'*

.....

Chapter Eighty-Two

THE MATRIX

1

The lone Australian pelican, *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, soared high above the Tweed rivermouth. He was in a shallow bank carving lazy circles in a rare blue, coastal thermal. He wasn't hungry and he wasn't in migration, he loved the Tweed, he was just up there for fun, for the pure joy of soaring flight. With his head comfortably resting on his back, for aerodynamic efficiency, he delighted in the crystal clarity of the spring day. He was not aware of the time chip implanted in his neck, nor of the fact that it had already done its job, which was why all the houses and jetties were now gone. It had also been some time since he scored a free feed from a fisherman. For quite a while he'd had to catch his own meals. He sensed that there was something different but his brain was too small to figure out what it was.

After many circles, he had soared from a starting altitude of two hundred feet to a not too shabby three thousand feet. He had not flapped his wings for over half an hour. He slowly drifted with the thermal, from his favourite bend in the river about a mile inland, towards the coast. He had done this before, on occasion, and just like before he found that the lift petered out fairly much above the beach at the edge of the great water.

On one turn he looked down the coast and spotted a sailing boat about a mile out to sea. The most striking thing about it, other than the fact that it was the only thing anywhere, was the blood-red colour of its sails. Even to his simple sense of the aesthetic, the contrast against the azure of the water was delightfully prepossessing. He noticed that the boat was sailing up the coast toward him. He wondered if maybe they had a fish for him.

He, as a rule, never flew out over the ocean. There was never any reason. He was a peculiar bird, though, who happened to like human contact. He liked to be close to them and he liked to watch them and occasionally have a fish thrown his way. Lately this pleasure of human contact had mysteriously eluded him and he missed it. He focussed on the boat more intently and associated it with the special pleasure that human contact brought him.

His brain might have been tiny but it knew how to dead reckon glide angles. He worked out in a fraction of a second that he could glide out to the boat from his altitude with a thousand feet to spare.

Under normal circumstances he would never have considered it, however, even though his little brain couldn't figure anything out it decided to bank out of the dying thermal and glide, as efficiently as a pelican's rotund shape allowed, towards the pleasure of human contact.

2

It was early afternoon on *Saturday 9th October 2123*. Mecca cut cleanly through the smooth water. The southerly change came and went without raising much of a swell. Within two days the westerly wind returned bringing with it optimum sailing conditions. Early that morning Lloyd decided to revert to what he termed 'real sailing'. He raised and set Mecca's blood-red sails causing her to heel over and power northward much to everyone's delight. After all, Lloyd was a sailor in the most traditional sense and nothing, not even gravity thrust, could compare to a long beam reach close to the coast in a perfect offshore breeze.

'We are about to become Queenslanders,' he announced relaxing at the tiller. 'That up ahead,' he said pointing, 'is the Tweed River.'

They considered a stop in the Tweed but decided to keep going due to the pristine conditions.

The four of them had been on the boat for over two weeks. The constant exposure to the elements was making them all quite tanned. Also, the mens' hair was getting longer and scragglier and they hadn't bothered to shave in all that time. They were also beginning to lose a few kilos and their eyes seemed to shine a little brighter than before. The girls' skin was showing signs of weathering and their hair had lost some of its sheen. They were losing one type of beauty, but gaining another, one more natural and athletic. Many times during the day they stopped the boat to go for a swim in the ocean, sometimes to cool down, sometimes for a wash.

3

Sophia was first to notice the metallic glint in the sky. She had been sitting on the bow with her feet dangling over the side being sprayed by the bow wave. They all watched intently as the shiny silver-metallic disc circled the boat about

200 feet above the water. It finally slowed down alongside Mecca, on the windward, port, side, matching its velocity. A panel opened on the upper hull of the space ship and a head popped out. They recognised Ben's face. Immediately after, Adam's face appeared. Both were grinning like Cheshire cats. In fact, everyone's face beamed with the joy of meeting one another again.

'Permission to come aboard cap'n,' Ben called out.

'Permission granted,' Lloyd replied cheerfully.

Ben wore his skin while Adam wore his levpack. Like two supermen they floated out from the hatch and landed on the boat, Ben on the port side of the foredeck and his father on the port side of the mast, grabbing onto it for support. Alex assisted Adam to remove his levpack and scramble into the cockpit. Ben just levitated into the cockpit when they made a space for him.

There was plenty of shaking of hands and patting on the back, and the girls both got a kiss on the cheek. Lloyd set the autopilot to run comfortably off the coast. Mecca was heeling over about twenty degrees, slicing cleanly northward in the smooth conditions. The sun was blazing and the day was warm and Albatross, by Fleetwood Mac, was playing on the iPod. The girls made coffee for everyone.

Ben's spaceship followed Mecca as if it was a balloon tethered by an invisible string.

'I see you put your sails up,' said Adam.

'Well,' responded Lloyd, 'who could resist these conditions.'

'I am not surprised at all,' said Ben. 'On Rama, the sailing folk all have access to gravity sails, but they all choose to sail the traditional way for the pure romance of it.'

'You are about to cross the border into Queensland,' said Adam. 'I recognised the Tweed River as we were coming in.'

'Yes, we were just noting that, before you arrived,' Lloyd replied.

'This may not mean much to any of you,' Adam continued, 'but I noticed from the air that the superbank is gone and that the old points are back. I remember surfing Greenmount Point in my youth before they started dredging the river. It was one of my favourite waves and they completely destroyed it. And now it's back.'

'Dad, as soon as things settle down, I promise that we will go and surf Greenmount Point again. And this time we'll get it to ourselves.'

Adam looked at his son and replied,

'You don't know how good that sounds, Benny boy.'

Ben turned to Lloyd and said,

'You are not so far from your destination now, Lloyd.'

'On the chart about 130 miles as the crow flies, give or take. A couple of days of good sailing and we'll be there.'

'You may rest assured that we will guide you in over the bar,' said Ben. 'I have checked and there is an adequately deep channel, however you will still need to make the crossing in the last hour of the rising tide. Once in the river you will have no problems. Also, currently there is virtually no swell either.'

'That is quite typical for this time of year, Ben,' Lloyd replied.

'By the way, what is your draft?'

'It is four feet three inches, Ben. There should be sufficient tide to make it over the bar I think.'

'I think so too, Lloyd. You know, the whole Noosa community cannot wait to welcome you all.'

All four of The Mecca crew smiled and thanked Ben for all his help.

'We have saved a few bottles of Grange for our arrival,' said Sophia, 'although I can barely cope with two glasses myself.'

'Yes,' said Alex, 'she's quite a cheap drunk you know.'

'All the more for the rest of us,' said Lloyd.

Everyone chuckled.

4

As they sat around the cockpit, sipping their coffees, the conversation randomly turned to telepathy. Lloyd had an enduring interest in the process since his student days. He asked Ben, who was a full telepath, if he could give the group any kind of insight into the process. Ben, as a rule, avoided discussing anything to do with the mind plane with non-telepaths. It just seemed pointless. To Ben it was analogous to an Earth human trying to explain calculus to his pet Labrador. However, despite his better judgement, he made a brief attempt at describing the general, overall concept. He began, slowly and concisely.

'I guess the main thing to know is that telepathic communication is many-faceted. In fact, there are no real limits to how many ways telepathic beings may engage with one another. Non-telepaths mostly imagine that telepathy is a thought transfer of words, however it is far more than that. It is an immersion in exchanged realities.' Ben looked at them all and asked, 'Am I freaking you out yet? Please let me know when I start freaking you out.'

Lloyd chuckled, 'Far from it, Ben.' He shook his head, 'Exchanged realities, how absolutely fabulous. Please continue.'

'OK. When I say realities, I don't mean pictures, or even movies, although it can be those things, I mean the whole 3D thing with sound and smell and feel ... all five senses, and these realities can be real or they can be imagined, er, conjured up.'

Everyone, except Adam, listened open-mouthed amazed. Ben elaborated,

'Say, for example, I wanted to get in touch with my mother who is in Noosa right now, although she could be anywhere, I could literally bring her into this reality here, in the mind plane, and place myself in it, and I could speak to her face to face. And the whole reality that she would experience would have been created by me, for her, in the mind plane and transferred via our mind thread connection. Is any of this making any sense? I am trying to keep the explanation as simple as possible.'

'Don't mind us,' said Lloyd, 'just please continue.'

'OK, this creating and holding together of a reality in the mind, and then transmitting it, this is called creative telepathy and it is a learned skill taught to our children by their teachers.'

What followed really amazed Ben. It was the choice of question that came as a result of his brief description of telepathy. In fact, Ben's whole judgement of the group was going to be based on the first question. Lloyd was the one who asked it.

'These realities, Ben, are they full of light? And, if so, where does this light come from?'

Ben looked at Lloyd astonished. The whole Mecca crew observed his eyes brighten with light intensity. Lloyd had asked the singularly most relevant

question, which attested to his incredible intelligence. Ben commenced with his explanation.

'Your question, Lloyd, touches on the fundamentals of existence, on the very nature of consciousness, and life, related to our universe. I shall try to explain it to you in a similar fashion as was explained to me by my teacher.' Ben thought for a moment, then speculated, 'The end of this will leave you either confused, disbelieving, or permanently altered. Yet it is the truth.'

They were all quietly amazed at how wise Ben sounded for such a young man. He continued,

'The light, where does the light come from? The light of the sun in the day,' he pointed at the sun, 'and the moon and the stars in the night, what light is it that shines in these. In fact, where does the light of all reality, our whole universe, come from? What about the light in our dreams? We all experience them. And what about the light of our visions and transcendental and psychedelic experiences? Where does all that light emanate from? I will tell you this, a truth most profound and secret, this light from all these things in truth comes from us, each one of us individually, for us. *We* are the light of our individual suns, moons and stars, and everything else in existence. *Ours* is the only light and everything is but a kruptos cipher.'

'Like in the movie, *The Matrix*?' Eva asked matter-of-factly.'

Ben looked at her even more surprised and his eyes iridesced even more intensely. '*How smart these people are,*' he thought to himself.

'Kind of,' he replied. 'You see, our experience of our physical universe, and I include our human body in that, merely comes to our awareness through the five senses. The light that stimulates our optic nerve is, at the same time, actual light and not actual light. It reaches our brain as an electronic coded signal. I will attempt to give you an analogy.' Ben looked at them all. 'By the way, how are you all coping?'

'You are starting to lose me,' said Sophia.

'You need to throw in the odd titbit about shoes or jewellery, Ben, to keep Sophia's interest up,' said Alex in jest. Everyone chuckled. Ben continued,

'Perhaps my analogy might help. Now imagine this; Sophia and Eva are sitting in adjoining rooms. These rooms have no windows and the doors are

closed. It is completely dark in these rooms. There is a television in each room and it is turned on. Sophia and Eva both proceed to watch a sunrise on these TV sets. They are both watching exactly the same thing. The signal coming into each television is the same, but Sophia is watching her sunrise and Eva is watching hers. My question is this; where is the light of the two suns coming from?’

‘Aaah,’ said Lloyd in a tone of realisation, ‘the light of the two sunrises is coming from the television sets. I see.’

‘And the signal,’ Ben elaborated further, ‘isn’t light and there is no way of knowing if it is coming in live or if it is pre-recorded. There is no point-of-time reference for Sophia and Eva to know within their isolated dark rooms. So, their whole reality may be nothing more than a replay of a pre-recorded signal, or even weirder, the signal might be a completely artificially synthesised reality, which is indistinguishable from a real reality, this then being played through a coded signal sent down the coaxial cable into the TV.’

He paused for a moment and thought about whether he should digress a tad. He decided to do so.

‘There is a perfect example of the existence of such an artificially synthesized reality in your own collective memories,’ he continued. ‘Apollo 11, the moon landing by the Americans, was 100% pre-recorded, in all its complexity, and then played back in real time. If you think about it, everything you know of what happened with Apollo 11 is what you were fed via your television sets. Even the NASA technicians, gawking into their monitors, were unaware that they were looking at a simple playback of a multifaceted synthesized reality. Apollo 11 never ventured beyond Earth orbit. You all watched a playback of pre-recorded fiction presenting itself as live transmission. And, to all our amazement, everyone on Earth bought it.’ Ben looked around at them all. ‘Er, I guess that I have strayed somewhat from the subject. How are you all coping?’

‘I must say, Ben, this is all starting to get pretty trippy,’ said Alex.

‘It gets worse,’ Ben replied. He went on. ‘Now, as a separate thing, the light in the TV, as well we know, is powered by the electricity which comes in through a wire. So, there are two things that come into the TV, the signal via the coax and the power via the wire. And so it is with us. The signal comes in through the senses and the power comes in through the spirit, which is what we really are.’

And the spherical screen on which we experience our 3D reality may be thought of as our event horizon of the mind, and this is in fact a singularity. And this singularity is in fact what each one of us are, and the power that powers us, and makes us shine, comes directly from the One. And being one with the One we attain the realisation that the source of this power is love. My teacher taught me; *Love is Light is Life*. This is the most profound truth in all existence.'

'So, what you are saying, Ben,' said Lloyd amazed, 'is that all the light we see is in fact our own light? Even the light of the sun is us ... shining?'

'And our light,' Ben added, 'is God's light, the light of the One, the source of all life, the source of all.'

'Wow,' exclaimed Lloyd.

'Wow indeed!' 'Holy cow!' 'May God be praised,' uttered the other three.

Ben continued,

'And the mystery of all mysteries is the eternal being and not being of everything. For example, your archaeologists have worked out that the universe is 4.5 billion years old, give or take, and it is generally accepted that we all live in one giant universe. This truth may be and not be at the same time. When it is not being, it is being something else. This something else is this. Each of us lives in his own private universe, completely separate from everyone else's. It is similar to other peoples' private universes, but it is never the same. These universes may merge when we meet however. Say we meet, Lloyd, and say that I am non-telepathic, my best experience of your private universe, which is infinite like mine, is your physical body, you see. My experience may become deeper if we become friends and I gain a deeper insight into you. If I am telepathic, however, my experience expands into your experience of your own private universe, beyond the shell of your physical form. I can see beyond the physical.

'The other thing about our private universe is that it is the mortal one, not us. It dies, not we, because we are eternal spirit, and our universe, which at its core is the body we inhabit, it ages and finally dies. But we do not. We go on and give birth to a new universe, which can be anything that the One may will. So, in a nutshell, our universe is only as old as our bodies and all the history, the pyramids and dug-up dinosaur bones etc., is all baked in, all programmed in the matrix if you like. And our private universe that I just described is the one that in

actuality exists for each and every one of us, and the illusory consensus universe does not exist, except as a very elaborate hypothesis.'

'So was Stephen Hawking wrong with his Bing Bang theory?' Lloyd asked.

'Actually, he was completely right, except he calculated the mathematics of his private universe, which was real, not the common one, which was the grand deception. He calculated that the universe, all space and time, was born out of a singularity in a big bang, for want of a better idiom. Well, he was so right. Mathematics doesn't lie. What Stephen Hawking failed to realise, right to his terminal breath, was that the singularity his calculations revealed was actually him. He calculated the birth and death of his own private universe, not the illusory common one, which is neither born nor dies because it doesn't exist, except as an idea. He calculated the mathematics of his own being, the poor wretch, however his mathematics couldn't reveal the illusion for him. As an example, imagine trying to decipher the act of surfing a wave, or sailing an ocean, from a bunch of numbers and formulae on a blackboard. It is patently impossible.

'So, in summary, the consensus universe is a non-reality made up of lies, theories and ideas. It functions like a mental prison, however none of it is real. Think about it.'

There was a pause in the conversation. Everyone had a sip of coffee and glanced out at the horizon and then up at the sun, the blazing light, and they all entered a momentary trance and a thought passed through each of them.

'That is my sun and this is my infinite universe, separate and unique from all the others, and all the light is my light, and all my light is God's light. And I am eternal, immortal, destined to live forever, while my infinite universe, the inner core of which is my physical body, is mortal, destined to die.'

In the end it was Sophia that broke the trance.

'Look,' she said, 'a pelican. We should throw it a fish.'

.....

Chapter Eighty-Three

THE NEVER NEVER

1

'You be lyin next to me in my bed,' said Mimo guiding Griffin into her bedroom. 'I be lyin next to you.'

She gently lay him down, placed his head on a soft pillow, walked to a side table and retrieved a small crystal container and opened it. With a fine set of silver tweezers, she took one grain of Fish, it was about the size of a grain of sugar, and placed it on Griffin's tongue. Then she took another grain and placed it on her own tongue and swallowed it.

'You be takin the ride but I be the one doin the flyin,' she said after she lay down next to him. You be needin to close your eyes and you be needin to keep em that way.'

Griffin closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

'That be right. You be just lettin go and be not expectin. And be not you reactin neither. I be there all the time ... workin. Maybe I be doin somethin special if I be gettin the opportunity. Somethin special it be for a special boy.'

2

It took the Fish about fifteen minutes to kick in.

Griffin entered the black void of infinity. He felt like he was floating because the black void was devoid of gravity. There were no reference points, no up or down, nothing. His body felt like it was made of warm water floating in some kind of infinite elemental black. He got a flash of memory of crawling through the earth in the same unfathomable darkness.

All of a sudden and gradually at the same time he began to see a pinpoint of light shine in the place where his heart was supposed to be. It was there and he entered it, and in this light he sensed his spherical vision. And almost immediately after, he saw another pinpoint of light, off to one side, which was slightly brighter than his. He saw it in another part of his spherical vision. And the two lights gave him a sense of space and perspective in the otherwise formless void. In the end he couldn't even think, he could only experience. First, he lost his arms and legs, and finally he lost his brain as well.

Liberty once said that Fish was like an acid trip on top of an acid trip, definitely not for humans of the non-telepathic persuasion. It took a wise old soul to successfully pilot a non-telepath through the Fish and there were none older, or wiser, than Mimo.

Ever so gently, he recognised the two singularities of light as his and her's. His light was less intense with a gold tinge. Her light was like a white diamond, shining brilliant, shooting out crystal beams in all directions. He was blown away.

As he looked at her, hypnotically, he saw her light begin to grow. It grew and grew, enveloping him within it. It continued to grow until it enveloped the whole infinite elemental black. Now, all was light like a fluorescent fog. And as he experienced, he saw the light recede away from him in all directions, like a wave going away. And as the bubble of light receded to infinity it became replaced by the fathomless void of outer space. He, as his light, now floated far out in outer space. He was near nothing but was surrounded by everything, by countless stars, everywhere.

Momentarily he sensed a presence behind him and he heard an ancient question,

'Trust, or not trust?'

'Trust,' he conveyed without hesitation.

He had felt his aching, nauseated body fade into nothingness. He experienced it being replaced by a subtle body made of nothing more than being itself. And he felt strangely like the back of this, his subtle body, had opened up, and it felt to him like a very calm entity had entered it, through this opening in his back, and merged as one with him.

Suddenly he felt his mind explode with understanding. He felt a new powerful control and a harmony beyond what he could have ever imagined.

He felt his back become straight like a ruler and a vertical line of seven shining singularities appeared before him. The realisation emerged within him that these points of light were actually running down his own spine, and that he was looking at them from behind, from outside of his body.

In ten galaxies one could count on one hand the number of beings that could comprehensively read and tune the chakras. The skill was based on an intimate knowledge of sacred songs. 'It be tricky stuff,' Mimo occasionally remarked.

First, she looked for the poison. She could see none. All the radioactive salt had been expelled from his body. *'Praise be the One,'* she said in her heart. She then focussed on his chakras. Everything was out of whack. The radiation had taken its toll. The chakras were all like wobbling tops. Every note was out of tune. This created pools and eddies in the Motherflow, and these were killing his body and thus his whole universe.

She placed her hands in the Motherflow and steadied the chakras in their spin, one by one, beginning with the heart chakra and working her way out. She sang as she worked and with her singing, she tuned the notes into *'pleasin'* harmonic tones.

Griffin was not going to emerge from the Fish the same being that he had been. He was going to be music of her own making, *'it bein to my likin'*. Also, as is normally associated with a non-telepathic human passing through the Fish, Griffin was going to become telepathic because the Fish permanently opened one up. And instead of floundering in this new space, he would thrive because he was the tune of Mimo, the Fishmaster.

After the chakras were tuned, she attended to the pools and eddies disrupting the Motherflow all through his body. She ran her fingers through the Flow like she was running them through long hair. The pools and eddies would have settled down on their own eventually because their cause was now gone, but it would have taken years. With her hands in the flow she manipulated each disturbance into a smooth, laminar stream. Fixing the pools was like removing a stone from a blocked streamlet.

The main characteristic of the Fish is that it facilitates a perfect state of oneness between two entities. That is why it is revered so much. It facilitates healing of one entity by another. Also, under its influence, the normally hidden depths and outer reaches of the mind plane unfold for the experiencer like a transcendental blossoming lotus.

3

When the healing was done, she looked into his history. She saw no animals except for a horse and a dog.

The following thing happened all at once and one thing at a time, all at the same time. He was born as seven different creatures. He saw the starlight and

sunlight of creatures of the air, water and earth, and he understood at that moment that he was the fourth element, the fire, the light of those seven universes. He lived each life fully, from birth to death, absolutely free in the wild, and he lived all these lives in the singularity, in the mind, in zero space and time.

Thus, he understood the horse, the wolf, the lion, the pelican, the eagle, the hummingbird and the dolphin. He understood them all intimately because he remembered once being one of them.

And he experienced galaxies and solar systems, and planets and their moons. And he flew through valleys and above high alps, and he followed winding rivers to endless oceans.

And they stood atop a high desert mesa, with a hot, dry, gusting wind blowing, and witnessed the mystic wonder of the setting sun. And an understanding was given him that this represented the sunset of his old life. And they sat on the edge of a high cliff, above a roaring ocean, and witnessed a glorious sunrise, and the understanding was given him that this represented the dawn of his new life.

All these things she showed to him, and many others, all in a moment and in an eternity, all at once, because she understood his history, and because she *'be takin a likin to the boy.'*

4

He awoke about twelve hours after he laid his head on the pillow. He felt himself being pulled out of the infinitude by a soft singing voice coaxing him to open his eyes.

'Be welcome back from the Never Never, Griffin.'

Griffin was so stupefied by his experience that, initially, his brain could not think and his mouth could not speak. He just lay in his bed with his eyes staring at the ceiling.

'You be bit raw for couple of days,' she said. *'You be havin couple of days before your friends be returnin. That be plenty of time for some nice soup.'*

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Chapter Eighty-Four

THE SIGHT

1

It was *Friday 8th October 2123*. Everyone, except for Fury, was fast asleep in the frigid darkness of the predawn. There had been talk, amongst the men, of the pragmatism of a timely evacuation from the Pinecrest camp.

'It's gonna get unbearable freezin up here,' Snake announced.

'All the lake will be good for in the middle of winter will be ice skating,' suggested Ludwig.

'And we got no skates,' said Cowboy.

'We're gonna have to move,' said Jonesy looking at his wife and daughters.

In the end it was far more the cold than the radiation that swung their minds towards Noah's relocation idea.

'I never hunted kangaroo before,' said Melvin.

Inga, who was Dirk DeRongo's girlfriend and was very worldly, announced that she had eaten kangaroo before. 'It's like eating cardboard, dahling,' she said with a scowled-up face.

Fury enjoyed free rein around the Pinecrest camp. No one bothered to tie him down or attempted to control him. He could come and go as he pleased. Occasionally, during the period while everyone waited for Griffin's return, he wandered off and explored the country for miles around. He found pockets of the sweetest grasses to eat to which he often tended to return. However most of the time he stayed close to the camp and kept company with the humans. He mostly hung around Jonesy's tent because that was where Tip and Fin were staying. Jonesy and Lori took the twins in and almost immediately adopted them as their own. Clara, Catherine and Connie rapidly became their best friends and constant companions. Fury had preferred and loved the company of young girls ever since he was a colt. The girl he loved most was his precious, however he hadn't seen her for some time.

2

While everyone slept, Fury wandered down to the lakeshore for a drink of water. Before he drank, he marvelled at the undistorted reflection of the star-

encrusted firmament on the mirror surface of the lake. Each shining little point of light was rendered perfectly. Even though he was the most intelligent horse that had ever lived, he nonetheless could not understand what he was looking at. He did not know enough to even think about it. He did, though, like all animals, experience a fundamental impish glee in the midst of it all, although he couldn't understand that either.

As he admired the stars in the mirror, and just as he was about to take that drink, something unusual caught his eye. There, in the reflection, he observed one of the shining little lights moving while all the rest remained completely still.

3

Three days after leaving Griffin with Mimo, Noah and Hether returned.

They had spent the time frolicking together within the magical Delphian Forest. For three days and nights he forgot that he was no longer a child. For three days and nights he lived the life of an Ilf, flitting about like a bird, relishing in the delights of sacred delicacies and magical entheogens. He also took much pleasure in the stunning beauty of Hether herself with whom he enjoyed numerous naked swims in a variety of secret pools. And yes, there was lovemaking.

Upon their return, Hether initially, as was the custom, greeted Mimo in the mind plane. Following this telepathic greeting, the heavy old door opened, with its customary long squeak, revealing Mimo standing there.

'It still be a might curious I be thinkin,' she said referring to the door. 'How be thee?'

'We be most fine, Mimo. How be thee?' Heather replied.

'There be good news, there be. Griffin be fine,' Mimo answered.

Everyone smiled as Noah and Hether entered Mimo's stone cottage in the tree. They could see, through a partially open door, Griffin lying asleep in Mimo's bed.

'He be restin,' explained Mimo. 'I fixed him,' she added, 'I fixed him but good.'

4

Fury watched as the softly-glowing, almond-shaped sky lantern almost, but not quite, merged with its reflection above the center of the lake.

The intergalactic cruiser dimmed its light as it came to a soundless hover.

'We'll wait till they wake up,' said Noah. 'How are you feeling by the way?'

'Like I've been born for the third time,' Griffin replied.

'I am certainly pleased to hear that.'

In a brief flash, Noah picked up the residue of a memory from Griffin. The memory was that of a canopy of a small tree that was being suffocated by a parasitic vine. And he felt the vine being stripped out of the canopy from between all the branches and leaves. The feeling was like the vine was being stripped from his own body, from between his own muscles and sinews. Strangely, for such a seasoned telepath as he, this experience was something quite new and illuminating.

5

Even as a boy, Jonesy was an early riser who loved the great outdoors. One of his favourite things was to be sitting by his campfire next to his motorbike, all alone out in the desert, miles from the noise of humanity, sipping on a hot cup of coffee, waiting for the sun to rise. This, as much as anything else, gladdened his soul to its core.

While still in high school he learnt to grow pot. He sold most of what he grew and with the proceeds he bought himself a Triumph Scrambler, just like the one that Steve McQueen rode. McQueen was one of his boyhood heroes. Two years before the state of California allowed him a motorcycle licence, Jonesy packed his backpack, put on his helmet and goggles, fuelled up and took off for the deliverance of the Mojave Desert. He traded a couple of pounds of dope for a .44 Magnum with an old codger he knew up the street. The poor old bastard was dying of cancer so he wasn't going to need it any more, however the reefer came in really handy because it helped to alleviate his symptoms.

Jonesy chose the .44 Magnum because it was the gun used by Clint Eastwood, his other boyhood hero, in all those Dirty Harry movies. Primarily he wanted the gun to scare off marauding coyotes that occasionally threatened him out in the desert. If they got too close, he blew their brains out. He always picked off the leader. This usually tended to scatter the pack. In general, he disliked killing, it was not part of his nature. He needed to be physically threatened to become lethal.

He carried the Magnum in a leather holster strapped to the left side of the motorbike. It hung between the gas tank and his left knee. He learnt to shoot with

his left hand because he wanted to be able to draw and fire the gun while riding his bike. His right hand was always on the throttle in those situations.

One time, as he was rolling down a desert highway on his Triumph, a crazy, ugly 'sonabitch' in a matt-black Mustang pulled up beside him on the left side of the otherwise empty road. The driver wound down his window and made threatening overtures at Jonesy for no reason. The 'psycho' even tried to run him off the road one time. Well, Jonesy drew the .44 Magnum out of its holster, with his left hand, and pointed it at the driver's head. The driver's attitude instantly changed. Jonesy then aimed at and shot out the Mustang's right front tire. The Mustang swerved and Jonesy watched, in his rear vision mirror, as it rolled over and over in a cloud of desert dust. He smiled, blew the smoke out of the end of the barrel, like Clint might have done, re-holstered his pistol and blasted up the long, desert highway towards the distant horizon. He was only sixteen when that happened.

6

It was early and it was cold. Jonesy dressed warmly and stuck his head through the tent opening. There was a hint of predawn light above the eastern horizon and it was absolutely calm. Immediately, prior to anything else, his attention was drawn in by the softly-glowing space ship levitating above the center of the lake. For a moment his half-asleep brain struggled to kick itself over. He just stood there, frozen in space, until a thought emerged.

'Noah?'

His mini trance was finally broken by the arrival of Fury who gently muzzled his shoulder.

'I do believe they're back,' he said speaking to the horse. He had no idea that the horse actually understood him. The spaceship remained motionless. Jonesy stood there for a short while waiting for something to happen and when nothing happened, he decided to proceed with his ritual morning routine of starting the campfire.

7

Melvin poked his head out of his tent. Like every other morning, he saw Jonesy tending to the fire. Unlike every other morning, though, there was a

spaceship levitating just above the water out in the middle of the lake. He grabbed a hold of Carla's foot and gave it a good shake rousing her out of her sleep.

'They're back, hon,' he whispered.

'Who's back?' she asked drowsily.

'Noah and maybe Griffin.'

'In their spaceship?'

'Yeah.'

She scrambled out of bed and joined him outside.

'Oh, I hope so,' she said, 'I so hope that he is alive. I prayed every night for his life.'

She scuttled over to her parent's tent and woke everyone up. That set off a chain reaction around the camp and before long everyone ended up standing around the fire, trying to keep warm, with their eyes firmly fixated on the space ship. Tip and Fin stood either side of Fury down by the lake. Both the girls were already dressed in their GTT overalls, with the hoods up and face masks and goggles at the ready for the burning rays of the imminent sunrise.

In the midst of the fire crackles a voice whispered,

'Look, it's moving ... it's coming this way.'

The ship silently drifted towards them. It came to a stop levitating a foot above the water at the edge of the lake.

'I think you ought to go first, Griffin,' Noah suggested. 'They are all waiting for you.'

'How long till the sun comes?' Griffin asked.

'Not long,' replied Noah.

'I better dress for the burning light then.'

'Certainly, Griffin, you do that.'

After a short pause, while Griffin prepared himself for daylight, a panel opened on the under surface of the craft and lowered itself as a ramp, nearly, but not quite, touching the grass on the bank. Everyone came down to the edge of the water and strained to see inside. They were all looking for Griffin.

As soon as Griffin appeared outside the ship, both Fin and Tip ran up the ramp and threw themselves into his arms. He hugged them both as they cried and he assured them that he was fine. He was also surprised at the much deeper way

he perceived them now, with a whole new sense. Two things became instantly evident to him. Firstly, Fin and Tip were far more beautiful than he had ever realised before. And secondly, he realised that it was going to take him a while to get used to his new perception. Everyone he met was now semi-transparent. He sensed all their thoughts and emotions, and intentions. He remembered Mimo explaining it to him. 'You be needin plenty of coachin,' she advised. 'In the meantime, you be keeping it to yourself and not be showin it to nobody.' So, he pretended to everyone that he did not have what Mimo called *'the sight'*.

Noah followed Griffin down the ramp. There came a wholehearted, spontaneous round of applause from the whole group with a couple of whoops and well dones for good measure. Snake stepped up to Griffin and warmly shook his hand. Then he turned to Noah and shook his hand as well. 'Good to see you back, compadres,' he said. 'How was your trip?'

'An unqualified success,' Noah replied.

'We've been doin plenty of jawbonin about your idea of leavin since you been gone.'

'I am pleased to hear that. And have you come to any decision?'

'Well, we ain't voted for it yet. We thought we'd wait till you came back before we made the final decision, but I'm pretty sure we're all ready to go, cause winter seems to be comin early this year, an she's raw.'

Noah looked at the fire and asked, 'Is that Arbuckle's I smell?'

'Tain't belly wash,' Snake replied.

After hugging the girls and shaking Snake's hand, Griffin stepped up to Fury and rubbed his forehead. He looked him directly in the eye and spoke to him in loving tones.

'Hello mighty horse.'

He was slightly taken aback when he clearly heard Fury's response in his mind.

'Hello, bright eyes, where have you been?'

One by one, everyone took their turn at properly welcoming Griffin back into the camp. They finally all sat around the fire in a big circle. Jonesy threw extra wood on the flames while Snake poured Noah a cup of strong coffee. Noah

brought out the intricately-carved, small, gold box containing the Mana and the small ceramic pipe.

'I can think of no better way to celebrate Griffin's recovery than partaking in a smoke of Mana,' he said.

'You said last time that it doubles your life,' said Snake.

'One puff will double its span,' Noah repeated. 'Two will extend it half as much again. You've had those. If you continue to partake of it for the rest of your lives, you may expect to live up to around nine hundred years.'

Snake responded the same way as always upon hearing that news.

'Holy guacamole!'

Noah looked at Fury who stood just outside the circle. He took a grain of the brown crumble from the gold box, stood up and stepped over to the stallion. He stroked his mane and placed it in his mouth. 'Live long mighty horse,' he whispered into his ear. He chuckled as he telepathically heard, 'I would have rather got a carrot.'

Noah taught them all the Raman custom of loading the pipe for someone else and wishing them a long life while lighting it.

When the smoking was done, Noah closed the small, gold container and handed it to Snake. He also gave him the pipe.

'This is for you,' he said in a kind voice, 'a gift from my people to your people. Smoke it every day the way I showed you and you will enjoy good health for a very, very long time.'

9

During breakfast, the discussion mostly focussed on the trio from the desert. Everyone expressed their amazement at the miraculous nature of their survival.

'Hardly more miraculous than yours,' said Fin after she learnt of the group's time shift.

There were oohs and ahhs as the trio related the story of their escape from one mile under the surface. Everyone was also amazed at hearing the story of the coyote attack and Fury's daring intervention. Tip and Fin clung closely to their man as the whole Pinecrest camp declared them bona fide heroes of the human race.

After breakfast, the talk turned to relocation.

'I'll be able to levitate the container into the transporter ship no problem,' explained Noah. 'You won't even need to dig it out of the ground.'

'How you gonna do that?' asked Jonesy.

'I'll use the tractor beam that is incorporated in all our transporter ships. How do you imagine we get things inside?'

'Oh, a tractor beam,' said Ludwig comically. 'Naturally, what else?'

'I suggest,' Noah continued, 'that, perhaps first thing tomorrow morning, you all replace all your things in the container, after which we'll load it into the transporter ship.'

Everyone looked at the huge spaceship levitating about fifty yards beyond Melvin's tent. It certainly appeared large enough to take the container as well as the whole group, including the horse.

As soon as the sun peeked over the horizon, Griffin and the girls covered their faces with their masks and goggles. They would have to hide from the daylight for another year, gradually letting their skins acclimatize to the light in the early mornings and late evenings. As well, Lori, Jonesy's wife, began weaning the trio off their food bars with canned vegetable and fish soups, as well as her delicious flapjacks topped with maple syrup.

They spent the rest of that day preparing for the move. They packed all their things and placed them together in bundles. Most everything was neatly stored away in the container by the end of the day. The tents were the last items to be packed away the following morning.

Everyone sat around the campfire that night and reminisced over the whole series of incredible events that had led up to their current situation. They also asked Noah plenty of questions. Everyone was most interested in Rama.

'Tell us, Noah, about your planet, and tell us how you found Earth and why you took an interest in it.'

'Well,' Noah began after thinking for a while, 'living on Rama is like living in a dream. Everyone is free and independent, everyone makes their own energy at home, there are no governments or money, or anything like that, although we did learn how to counterfeit your money quite well, which came in quite handy in the years before the comet.'

'We, the Rama, are similar to you in the way we live. We live as families in houses. On Rama, families stay together. The old people live with the young, everyone together. Certainly, we travel, sometimes for extended periods like I am doing now, but we maintain constant relationship with our family members in the mind plane, which means telepathically, which is a lot more intimate than you might imagine, you see, because distance is irrelevant in telepathic communication. We travel and then we return home to our mothers and fathers, grandparents and grand-grandparents, and so on.

'We instantly fell in love with Earth when we stumbled upon it. It is beautiful, just like Rama, and the environment is almost identical, perfectly suited for our visitations.

'We also fell in love with many Earth humans,' Noah looked at them all, 'despite the fact that they were non-telepathic. Sadly, we found many on Earth to be infected by a telepathic disease. Er, that does not include anyone here. Unknowingly, the infected ones lost control of their bodies to truly evil, alien entities who, although not being physically able to exist in the Earth's environment, could live their accursed lives through an Earth-human vessel and wreak havoc all over the planet until they achieved their ultimate goal, to destroy the planet through nuclear war. I prefer not to venture too far into this subject except to say that the people who were time shifted were special individuals who demonstrated supreme strength of spirit to resist the alien compulsion and retain the integrity of their own being. Besides ultra-violence, these dark abominations, through their human vessels, engaged in the destruction of the social order through a variety of sicknesses of nature such as homosexuality and the particularly degenerate deviance of paedophilia. None of this exists on Rama.

'All this is now gone from the Earth, consumed in the fires, earthquakes and floods following the impact of the comet.

'Please do not think any more about what I just said because that was all in the past, before the comet. All living Earthlings in the present are free sentient beings not possessed by any foreign entities.' He looked at them all and smiled and said, 'You are all free to be as you choose to be.'

None of them even imagined the possibility of Noah actually monitoring and controlling each of their minds individually. He knew that none of them were

actually free because they were now under Rama control. He monitored them because he could not allow any of them to have a subversive thought, for their own good, because in his own mind the Rama were the benevolent species, a force for good, and Earth was now theirs, and to them the Earth humans were, in a way, like pets that they dearly loved and took care of. Another analogy might be something like the saving of the most valuable animals from a burning zoo.

To say that none of the Earth humans were aware of Noah's mind control over them is actually not completely true. There was one. Griffin had the thought, but held it back. He sensed Noah's control, but did not react. He remembered Mimo's words well.

'You got to be hidin the sight, boy.'

In spite of Griffin's attempt to conceal a thought from Noah, Noah was onto him 100 percent. They glanced at one another. Noah smiled and thought,

'You'll have to get up mighty early in the morning, Griffin.'

As it turned out, Griffin understood the meaning of that phrase because Rip used to use it all the time down in the base. No one could fool *him* either.

10

Next morning, *Saturday 9th October 2123 (USA time)*, a day later in Australia, everyone gathered around the Pinecrest campfire for the last time. There was plenty of coffee and flapjacks to go around, not to mention canned bacon and tomatoes, as well as powdered eggs. They truly had a happy feast that morning, 'to fuel up for the big move,' Snake said.

After breakfast and a ritual smoke of Mana, the men began breaking down the tents and packing them and their contents into the container. As there was some spare space, they stuffed their backpacks and extra clothing in there as well. Noah told them that even though October was autumn in the southern hemisphere, Noosa would require no more than shorts, a T-shirt and sandals to be comfortable.

During the process of loading the container, Ace, the helicopter pilot, asked Noah about the afore-mentioned tractor beam. His interest stemmed from his technical bent, as well as the fact that he had done many jobs, over the years, lifting and transporting heavy objects with a variety of helicopters.

Noah explained that what he termed 'the tractor beam' was in actual fact 'three beams, of sorts.'

'You see, Ace,' Noah continued, 'the primary beam, or it might be more appropriate to call it a vibration, causes the object to become transparent to the ubiquitous graviton field, which is what creates gravitational attraction and inertial mass in matter. It neutralises the mass of the object. That in turn renders the object, and its contents, weightless. This primary beam is supported and guided by a carrier laser beam, which is shaped to the exact dimensions of the object. The laser beam is what you can see. Once the object is rendered massless, a third invisible beam, it's not really a beam and it sort of is, what happens is that an energetic, harmonic, standing wave is set up between the ship and the object, which causes the two to become attracted to one another. And because both the ship and the object are massless, the amount of energy required to attract them together is less than that required for one beat of a sparrow's wing, although I'll need to use a tad more force to pull the container out of its semi-buried confinement. Have I made any sense to you?'

'Some,' said Ace. He shook his head and mumbled, 'You guys got some awesome tech, man.'

'Nyeah, it's all relative, Ace. The best thing about it is that the whole process is controlled with the mind in exactly the same fashion that you control the movement of your own limbs. Exactly the same.'

'Without thinking,' Ace triggered.

'Yes, without thinking,' Noah confirmed.

11

Everyone stood and watched in complete awe as Noah remotely manoeuvred the transporter ship over the semi-buried container. They observed as four large triangular panels opened downwards, exposing the voluminous interior of the craft. A green beam next shone out through the center of the square opening. It shone down upon the container, enveloping it by precisely circumscribing its rectangular shape. Up to this stage there was no sound.

Suddenly a low hum began. It actually sounded like two hums in some type of harmonic chord. The group gasped in amazement as the heavy container began to move. Dirt crumbled around it and stones rolled off its side as it slowly,

seemingly all by itself, extracted itself from its hundred-year-old internment and floated skyward directly into the hold of the ship. When it was inside, the panels closed. The ship then levitated down to the lakeshore where another panel opened and became a ramp inviting them to enter.

In ones and twos, they walked up the ramp into the spacious intergalactic transporter. Leading the way were Snake and Trixie. Behind them came Jonesy, his wife Lori and three of his four daughters, Clara, Catherine and Connie. Following was Melvin and his flame, Carla, the fourth and eldest of Jonesy's daughters. Next was Dirk DeRongo, often referred to as 'the voice' by the crew, and his stunning girlfriend Inga. Following them were Clint Rogers, mostly known as Cowboy, and Lauren Cole his famous movie-star girlfriend. Next were Ludwig and his lovely wife Ivana. Following them were Ace and his sizzling Italian goddess girlfriend Johanna. Next to last up the ramp were Griffin, Fin and Tip. Making up the rear were Noah and Fury, the telepathic wonder horse who understood English and possessed a refreshingly twisted sense of humor.

'A couple of fillies wouldn't go astray,' the horse thought to the alien.

'I will scour the whole planet for them,' the alien replied to the horse.

12

There was no one left on the ground to witness the two intergalactic cruisers silently rise into the air. The large one carried Earth's precious cargo while the small one was empty. It tagged along being flown remotely by Noah.

Initially Noah flew them vertically skyward for a hundred miles. They parked up there for a while until everyone calmed down a bit. Not unexpectedly, they got quite excited about riding in a UFO for the first time. Experiencing everything on the spherical holographic display only added to the hysteria. Reacting to the frenzied babble within the ship, Noah and Jonesy shared a hearty chuckle.

'I think they all flew over the cuckoo's nest,' quipped Jonesy.

'It's a natural reaction,' Noah replied.

When everyone calmed down somewhat, and before they headed off across the Pacific, Noah took them for a brief scenic tour of what used to be the USA. They gasped at the sight of the huge, still smouldering, comet crater, the inland

ocean that once used to be the Mississippi Valley, the unfamiliar new coastline of California and the complete absence of civilization.

'No one left alive,' commented Snake.

'That comet sure did a job on the States,' said DeRongo.

'The nuclear reactors finished the job,' Noah added in a frustrated voice. 'However, that is the past, something best forgotten. For us, the future is in places like Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania and the islands of the South Pacific. Thank the One that the people who lived there steered away from nuclear energy. Thank the One for that.'

Ludwig contributed a final, haunting word.

'America has been erased from the hard drive. There is not a trace of her, nothing, no backups. When, in the wake of time, she fades from our memories, she will become unremembered ... forever ... like she never existed.'

'Er, not quite,' said Noah.

'No?' Ludwig asked.

'No. You see we have saved all the music, all the movies and all the great books. They are all permanently stored in crystal memory on Rama. America will be remembered, through those, for a long, long time to come.

.....

Chapter Eighty-Five

TIMELESS

1

Thirty millennia ago, give or take a thousand years, the first inhabitants arrived, possibly from Indonesia, settled and became a tribe in the Noosa region. A federal court determined, in 2003, that the name of the tribe was the Kabi Kabi. To celebrate this monumental decision, the judges all went to the pub and got righteously pissed.

It had been generally promoted that the name Noosa came from the local Aboriginal word noothera, or gnuthuru, from the Kabi Kabi language. This stood for shadow or shady place. An 1870 map showing the Noosa River as Nusa River however suggested that perhaps the name was derived from the Indonesian word for island.

The first Europeans to blunder into the region, way back in the 1820s, were believed to be escaped convicts. The first European settlers arrived in the 1860s, roughly a century before Hayden Kenny came and discovered the classic surfing points.

Thankfully, those early settlers appreciated the beauty of the place enough, particularly the bays, that they set aside a reserve to protect the area. This happened way back in 1879. The reserve officially became a national park in 1939. The 1960s saw a menagerie of surfing hippies and tree-hugging greenies form the Noosa Parks Association. The Association was chiefly responsible for fending off nasty Nazi developers who wanted to build ugly skyscrapers everywhere and turn Noosa into another palm-greasing, excrement magnet along the lines of the hideously-named Gold Coast.

As a consequence of all these things, nothing ever changed in the Noosa National Park. Time never got a foothold there. It was, and is, a bubble of space where time does not exist, where nothing changes. The Park looked exactly the same in 2123 as it did in 1960, in 1879 and even 28,000 years before Jesus Christ walked the Earth.

And a million years from now, when a surfer rounds Dolphin Point and witnesses those perfect lines breaking in Granite Bay, he will see the same thing

and get the same feeling that all those young surfers got all those thousands of millennia before him, because unlike all places in the common universe, this one, this magic one, is timeless.

2

By the end of the 1960s, enough surfers had made it a habit to walk the extra mile beyond Teatree to Granite that they trampled out a permanent walking track. The waves were always a foot or two bigger in Granite and much less crowded. By the time the seventies rolled around, the tourists began discovering the delights of Noosa and a wider, much more permanent track was established by the National Park authorities. By the time Travers Comet arrived this track was even paved.

In 2123, there was no track at all. Everything was once again overgrown and impassable because everything man-made was destroyed by two giant tidal waves. Gradually, over the decades, nature returned to its balanced state. The vegetation regrew and the ocean currents settled back to normal. The coastal current, running from south to north, brought the sand into the bays. This sand filled the gaps between the rocks and boulders, smoothing out the bottom and causing the waves to peel with pristine perfection.

3

It was the morning of *Monday 11th October 2123*, the day after all the kerfuffle over the arrival of the Americans. They arrived in a huge transporter ship and after scouting up and down the Noosa River, they decided to park their shipping container about a hundred yards west of the first settlement, roughly where Noosaville used to be.

Everyone was planning a big get-together to celebrate the Americans coming to Australia, but they decided to postpone the festivities until the group sailing up the coast arrived. That gave the Americans a little more time to establish their camp. They set up their tents, dug the latrines and prepared the fireplaces. To their delight they discovered an abundance of seafood there and fertile soil supremely suitable for growing anything one desired. The men collected firewood as well as fresh water from a nearby creek. They found the river water to be a tad too salty for drinking due to tidal influence. The river was much less salty than the ocean, however, and everyone had a swim and was

delighted with the clarity and warmth of the water. Their first night was so pleasant that many of them slept under the stars.

4

Slater and Thebe bobbed up and down on their surfboards waiting for a wave. They sat well inside the bay because the swell was only a couple of feet.

Granite Bay had always been a swell magnet and almost mysteriously, while all the other points were flat as a lake, Granite sucked in the imperceptible energy, focussed it, and produced a perfect two-to-three-foot peak that peeled off mechanically, for about fifty yards, across a shallow underwater shelf.

They knew that the wave would not begin to break until about an hour before low tide and that it would only break for a couple of hours at best.

Parked levitating a foot above the tiny beach, half way out along the point, not more than twenty yards from where they waited to catch a wave, was their open-topped saucer. A number of these saucers had been brought over to Earth in some of the larger space ships during the time just prior to the arrival of the time shifters.

They had been surfing for about half an hour and each of them had ridden a few pleasant waves when they noticed a boat, with two red sails, come gliding around the point. They could make out four people on board.

'I think it's the people we've been waiting for,' said Thebe as she waved.

They noticed the boat's jib furl in and one of the crew attend to the dropping mainsail. They observed another crew make their way to the bow and get ready the anchor. They then noticed the boat turn in their direction and silently glide towards them.

5

They watched the boat glide to within about a hundred feet of them and drop anchor. They decided to paddle over and say hello to the crew. As they approached, they noticed the word Mecca neatly painted on the stern.

'Ahoy there in the water,' Lloyd called out cheerfully.

'Hello,' responded Thebe, 'we've been expecting you. How was your journey?'

'Full of surprises,' said Lloyd. 'Would you like to come aboard and have a cold drink?'

Thebe and Slater were helped aboard from the stern. They tied their legropes to the pushpit as they left their surfboards floating upside down so the wax wouldn't melt in the hot sun.

Everyone introduced themselves to everyone else.

'Ben told us you were coming,' said Thebe accepting a glass of cold water from Eva. 'He told us that he met you in Sydney Harbor.'

'Yes,' replied Lloyd. 'The craziest thing about it was that he met us with his dad, Adam, who I had known way back in our university days. The encounter was positively surreal let me tell you.'

'On many levels,' added Alex.

Sophia handed a glass of cold water to Slater. He took it and thanked her.

'As we understand it, you are establishing a settlement in Noosa,' said Lloyd.

'Yes,' replied Thebe, 'it is our favourite place. This bay,' she panned around with her arm, 'is one of the reasons it makes it so.'

The Mecca foursome looked around Granite Bay for the first time in their lives. In that moment they experienced a strange feeling, a sensation not unlike dreaming. They thought they felt a mother, a huge mother, as huge as the whole bay, wrap her enormous arms around them and welcome them there in a loving embrace.

6

They talked for over an hour. During that time, Adam, Ambriel and Ben flew over from the settlement. Ben and his mother flew in their levitation suits while Adam used his lev-pack.

To the Mecca crew the sight of them flying over the hill into the bay looked like something out of Superman. Even though they were fairly substantially exposed to gravity flight back in Watson's Bay, they nonetheless still experienced a mild, surrealistic mind spin when they saw it.

'It just doesn't compute in my brain,' said Lloyd.

Sophia didn't seem to have any such problems.

Nine people on board the compact sloop turned out to be quite a squeeze. Adam kicked off the conversation.

'Let's see if I can remember. I know Lloyd and Eva, and you are, er, Alex, and this lovely creature is, er, don't tell me, don't tell me ... Sophia?'

'You have the memory of an elephant,' said Sophia.

'Not bad for an old basket,' said Ben.

'I know what he really means by old basket,' said Adam having a laugh.

Ben turned to Slater and asked him the oldest question in surfing.

'Get any?'

Slater gave him the oldest answer.

'A couple.'

'What a splendid place this is,' said Lloyd referring to the bay.

'Wait till you see the rest of it,' said Adam.

'The tide is still a bit low for crossing the bar,' said Ben. 'About four hours and it'll be good, and it's as flat as a tack over there. It'll take you about half an hour to get to the rivermouth. You can see it from here.'

Ben pointed westward towards the rivermouth. Lloyd picked up his binoculars and had a look. 'I see it,' he said. 'It looks completely calm.' He put the binoculars down and suggested, 'You know, Ben, you are most welcome to ride on board with us if you wish.'

'I might just take you up on that,' replied Ben.

Alex asked Slater about the saucer parked above the small beach half way out along the point.

'A few were brought over from Rama,' said Slater. 'Unfortunately for you, they are all telepathically controlled.'

Ben chimed in, 'My step-uncle, Zeke, who also built dad's lev-pack, has built a manual saucer, with hand controls, that is suitable for non-telepaths.'

'We met Zeke in Pittwater,' said Lloyd 'He brought us the gravity sail that he designed for Mecca.'

'I have actually had a short flight in that saucer,' said Adam. 'You can all pick his brain about it yourselves because he is here in Noosa, although I think that he's popped off to Rama with Iapetus for a few hours to pick something up.'

'Before Zeke came to Rama,' said Ambriel, 'there was no interest in developing non-telepathic levitation devices. But he changed all that. He is a constant frenzy of design and invention.'

'He's always been like that,' said Adam.

Adam looked at Ben and pointed at the small beach, 'That little beach is where you picked me up.'

'That's true,' said Ben nostalgically. 'It's hard to believe that it was over a hundred years ago.'

'We never got time shifted, we spent the time living on Rama,' explained Adam.

Not long after, Adam and Ambriel returned to the settlement on the river, Slater and Thebe resumed their surfing while Ben stayed on board and kept company with the crew. A few hours later, they set off for the Noosa rivermouth to catch the high tide for the bar crossing.

.....

Chapter Eighty-Six

JOURNEY'S END

1

Much of the time, especially after a protracted dry spell, there is not a well-defined channel of deeper water running out of the Noosa River. In those circumstances a sand bar runs unbroken across the whole rivermouth. This makes attempting a crossing, even on flat days, hazardous due to the shallow water. Many a keeled yacht has run aground and got stuck in the sand in those situations. Fortunately, there had been good rains prior to the arrival of the time shifters. The runoff swelled the river and flushed the built-up sand out to sea. A deep channel was gouged out across the western side of the bar. Going upstream, across what used to be known by the local fishermen as the Frying Pan, the channel crossed the river to the eastern side and then again to the western before opening out into deeper water.

Ben acted as guide as Lloyd motored Mecca across the whole mouth of the Noosa River. He decided to use the diesel for the crossing because he felt that he would have finer control of the boat that way. They were literally in front of the dunes on the western bank before Ben instructed Lloyd to turn the boat shoreward.

It was virtually impossible to see the channel that day as there was no surf breaking across the bar and the afternoon sun was reflecting off the water.

'I can't pick the deep water,' said Lloyd.

'It's there,' said Ben, 'but it's tricky and not very wide. The channel turns left as soon as we get in over the sand bar.'

Eva adopted their standard routine for bar crossings. She stood on the bow wearing her Polaroids and guided Lloyd with hand signals.

'It's nice to give the diesel a run,' said Lloyd nervously as his eyes darted from Eva to Ben to the depthsounder.

'I think we're past the worst of it,' commented Alex, clearly not fully appreciating the tension of the moment.

'I am glad that you are so calm about everything, Alex,' said Lloyd. 'I'd hate for anyone to panic.'

After a few minutes of very judicious motoring they rounded one last bend and arrived in the sanctuary of the river proper.

2

Like a wondrous vision from a faraway time the Raman tepees of the new settlement, located on the eastern bank about a mile upstream, seemed to glow in their own light in the blazing afternoon sunshine.

'The spot where the settlement is located used to be called Munna Point,' Ben explained. 'There is a creek there, which enters Noosa River, called Weyba Creek.'

'It looks like an Indian camp,' said Sophia. 'All the tents look like tepees.'

'We call them wams,' said Ben, 'and the overall camp is called a dom.'

'That sounds like the Slavic word for home,' said Lloyd, 'and wam sounds like an abbreviation of wigwam.'

'The Rama have always been travellers and explorers since time immemorial,' Ben explained. 'No one knows how many times this planet has actually been discovered. Certainly, the common words would suggest at least twice. As I understand it, Lloyd, Rama history fades darn near into infinity. You might find this hard to believe, but they are about to outlive their own star, their sun, which fortuitously has given birth to a new star, a new sun. We are not aware of any other people in the totality of the explored universe that have achieved such a feat.'

'You amaze us, Ben,' said Eva astonished.

'I doubt that any of us could have even imagined such a thing,' said Lloyd.

Suddenly everyone looked at Sophia. She smiled and said,

'No, this is something beyond even my imagination.'

'I'm shocked,' said Alex.

'I think we are all shocked. You see, Ben,' said Lloyd looking at Ben, 'Sophia is usually way ahead of the rest of us, especially with inconceivable concepts.'

'They are all exaggerating, Ben,' said Sophia chuckling, 'I am just a simple waitress, that is all.'

The conversation reverted to the settlement as Mecca slowly motored up the Noosa River.

'Do you see those tents just a bit further up the river?' Ben pointed.

'Yes,' said Lloyd.

'That is the American camp. They arrived in the big transporter ship parked across the river there. There is quite a story about three of them but I won't spoil it. I'll let you find out when you settle in. Their story is as unbelievable as the one about the two sons of Rama.'

'We shall await the telling of that tale with bated breath, Ben,' said Eva.

'Is that a horse?' asked Alex pointing into the distance.

'Affirmative,' said Ben, 'he arrived with the trio I just mentioned.'

As Mecca approached the dom they could see people wave to them. The crew waved back. There were happy smiles everywhere.

Lloyd kept an eye on the depthsounder as they motored closer to shore. Eva positioned herself on the bow and prepared to release the anchor.

'We must remember that it is high tide now and must thus anchor in slightly deeper water,' explained Lloyd.

At this point of the river the current was running quite slowly, two to three knots at most. Lloyd positioned Mecca in the chosen spot, pointing upstream about fifty feet from the bank, slipped the propeller-drive into neutral and instructed Eva to 'drop the pick, darling,' which she dutifully did. He then let the boat drift backwards in the current until it took up tension on the anchor chain and the anchor bit into the sandy bottom. He shut down the diesel and declared, 'she might swing a bit when the tide changes, or if the wind comes up, but she won't touch anything ... so we are here, we are at journey's end.'

Everyone smiled and gave a rousing hooray.

Lloyd shook Ben's hand and thanked him for 'a fine bit of piloting'.

Ben said that it was his pleasure and then suggested that if they didn't need him anymore, he would leave them and allow them to get themselves sorted out. They all watched him lift off the deck and fly the fifty feet over the water to the riverbank.

3

The dinghy, tethered to Mecca's stern, was twelve feet long. Lloyd constructed it out of Huon Pine. He built both it and Mecca at the same time using the carvel technique. It is fair to say that they were both absolute works of art.

The dinghy had a ten-horsepower, Yamaha, two-stroke, outboard motor attached to the transom and was covered by a custom-fitting, watertight tarpaulin. It carried all the excess supplies such as three tents, airbeds, butane bottles, cookers, utensils, spare fuel, hunting knives, diving gear, spear guns, fishing rods, nets and extra food.

'The first thing we will need to do,' said Lloyd, 'is unload most of the things out of the dinghy in order to make room for us. We can put everything on the foredeck.'

They brought the dinghy alongside, removed the tarpaulin and began unloading the cargo. Every now and then they would pause and one of them would glance around and say something vague with an almost haunted tone in their voice.

'Well, here we are,' said Lloyd.

'It's a long way from where we used to be,' added Eva.

'Not just in distance, but in time as well,' said Alex.

'That is because of you,' said Sophia accusingly.

'We would all be a long time under the sod if it weren't for the Ramans and their time chips,' responded Alex.

'I believe they refer to themselves as the Rama, not the Ramans,' said Lloyd taking a long, almost hypnotic look at the white tepees just beyond the riverbank.

'Their camp looks almost magical,' said Eva dreamily.

Lloyd snapped them all out of their daydream saying, 'Let's finish unloading the dinghy and then venture ashore and meet everyone.'

4

Just prior to setting off in the dinghy, Lloyd thought that it might be a good idea to go over the names of the people they had already met.

'So, first we met Adam and his son Ben, back in Watson's Bay. Then we met Adam's wife, er ...'

'Ambriel,' Eva remembered.

'Yes, thank you, darling, Ambriel, what a lovely name. Then, down in Pittwater we met, er ...'

'Zeke,' said Sophia.

'Yes, that's right, Zeke. Thank you, Sophia. Zeke made the gravity sail for Mecca and came with Adam and Ben when they brought it from, er, I still have trouble coming to terms with this, er, Andromeda would you believe?'

'He seemed a touch eccentric,' said Alex.

'I concur with that observation, Alex,' responded Lloyd, 'however that is par for the course for an inventor exploring the edge of the envelope.'

'He must be doing something right to be living with a Rama family on their own planet,' said Sophia.

'Yes, especially considering that virtually all the rest of his species are all extinct,' said Alex rather dramatically.

'Not us,' Sophia whispered in a haunting voice.

'Fiddle-faddle,' said Eva. 'Let us go and greet the future.'

5

They came ashore right in front of the dom. Ben and Adam were first to welcome them ashore and they helped pull the dinghy out of the water. Ambriel hugged everyone and introduced them to Lucy and Kane. Noah was also there, having just brought the Americans across the Pacific the previous day. Adrian was visiting as well at that time. He was checking up on some of his time-shifted bird flocks. Zeke and Iapetus had just returned from a day trip to Rama. Iapetus flew Zeke back to his workshop in order that he might pick up two special gifts, one for the Mecca crew and another for the Americans. The intention was to present them with these gifts at the gathering the following night.

When in Noosa, Zeke stayed with Lucy in their wam. Iapetus slept in the wam of the rising star, which Noah graciously vacated in honor of the great man.

Because it was so late in the day, the Mecca crew decided to sleep on the boat and set up their camp in the morning. They met all the Americans around the fire that night. Stories were swapped and friendships were forged, and a quite mind-expanding herb, which Adrian brought back from a planet called *Canaba*, was smoked. Even Sophia tried some. Much laughter and plenty of beautiful singing resulted, imbuing the nocturnal serenity with rapturous sentience.

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Chapter Eighty-Seven

THE GATHERING

1

It was as stunning a sunset as had ever come to pass in that faraway place called Noosa. The high cirrus lit up in radiant fire in a huge semicircle that faded into a spectrum of pinks, blues and purples towards the eastern horizon. This infinite palate of colours turned the firmament into a deiform psychedelic reverie.

It was the evening of *Tuesday 12th October 2123*, the day the longtime-germinating Rama dream crystallised out of that place where all such dreams dwell, the incomprehensible place imagined by many and known only as the *mystic singularity*.

2

The day had been a hive of activity. Everyone was still busy settling in. The Americans set up their camp similar to the Pinecrest layout. Melvin and Carla set their tent by the river, about thirty yards upriver from the main camp.

'I like my space,' Melvin explained.

Griffin, Tip and Fin were given a comfortable tent of their own, which they set up on the upstream edge of the main camp, on a grassy knoll just above the sand, closest to Melvin and Carla. Tip and Fin found kindred spirits in Carla and her sisters. They loved just being kids around each other.

The container was conveniently located at the back of the Americans' camp on the edge of the bush.

All the latrines were dug about fifty yards over the back, in the bush, in a spot that was chosen so as to eliminate the possibility of any underground seepage getting into the surrounding aquifers.

3

The Mecca crew, after spending the previous night on board, busied themselves shuttling their things to shore in the dingy and setting up their three tents. They chose a nice spot about half way between the dom and the American camp. The night before, Snake tipped them off about the best way to go about excavating a latrine. With borrowed shovels Lloyd and Alex set about digging with gusto. They managed to finish the task mid-way through the afternoon. The

girls gave them an extra juicy kiss as a reward, after which they all enjoyed a cool swim in the river.

‘How much would our spot have been worth a hundred years ago, Lloydie?’ Eva asked as she wallowed in the water.

‘Millions, my precious, millions.’

4

Noah and Griffin set off early that day, in the big transporter ship, looking for fillies. The wild horses of Australia are called brumbies. About fifteen miles inland from the settlement, in the lush Mary Valley, they found a healthy herd of fourteen fillies and one spirited stallion. Noah decided that the stallion wasn't going to mind sacrificing half of his harem, so he picked out seven of the youngest ladies and levitated them up into the air and into the hull through the open panels in the undersurface of the ship. They chuckled as the stallion protested by bucking, shaking his head and kicking at the sky.

Noah telepathically calmed the fillies for the return journey to Noosa. He closed three of the four triangular panels in the undersurface, then retrieved a carrot from a metal basket, attached to the interior of the hull, and cut a slit in it using a small knife. He placed a grain of Mana in the slit and said, ‘That stallion deserves a thank you treat. I'll just fly down and give it to him while you mind the princesses.’ He then pulled the hood of his levitation suit over his head and jumped through the triangular opening.

Griffin marvelled as he watched Noah float into the green valley a hundred feet below.

As soon as Noah landed, he began telepathically calming the stallion. He made his suit a natural green and quietly walked up to the horse.

‘Soooo ... you be the mighty brumby then,’ he said softly looking the wild horse directly in the eye. ‘Fourteen fillies, eh? Well, I just wish to apologise for pinching seven of them, however you may rest assured that it is all in a good cause.’ He held his hand out with the carrot in it. The horse pricked up his ears and stepped over. He sniffed Noah's hand, then took the carrot.

‘Live long mighty brumby,’ Noah whispered as he patted the horse. He noted that the brumby and all his fillies had been time chipped.

It was pretty much the middle of the day when they returned to the settlement. Noah brought the big ship in low over the river and silently parked it at the edge of the water. A ramp opened on the undersurface and lowered itself down onto the beach, almost, but not quite, touching the sand. It was covered in a black, grippy rubber.

‘Would you mind calling Fury over, Griffin?’ Noah requested.

‘Sure,’ Griffin replied. He hopped down the ramp and, surprising even himself, called out to Fury telepathically.

The curious black stallion came galloping down the beach from further up the river. He came up to Griffin and muzzled his shoulder.

‘What’s up?’ he heard the horse say in his mind.

Griffin just turned to face the ship. Fury looked over and immediately snapped his tail a few times and whinnied as he spotted the brumby fillies.

As the fillies exited the ship, they all looked around for their stallion. Noah had, by this time, released his telepathic tether of them. They kicked around and then suddenly took off for the bush. Seeing this, Fury reared up as high as he could, whinnied a couple more times and took off after them.

Noah came over and quipped, ‘Long time between drinks for that Romeo, I suspect.’

The quip went right over Griffin’s head. He was still a virgin, but not for long. Noah continued,

‘He has to stop them trying to find the old brumby stallion and pull them into line. It is what being a stallion is all about I imagine.’

‘They look pretty feisty,’ Griffin observed.

‘I expect he will get a kick out of that,’ Noah replied.

Everyone in the American camp witnessed and savored the moment. Fury’s obvious joy gave them all a shot of heart for the challenges ahead.

5

A number of new ships arrived through the day. Max and Ada flew over from Rama to attend the big celebration. Their son, Albion, who went by the name of Scott during his Earthly adventures back in the late 1960s, also flew in with his twin wives, Evka and Lara, who looked positively stunning with their blond hair

cascading half way down their backs. Accompanying them were their four children who arrived in their own individual ships.

Albion sired twin sons and twin daughters. The sons were Evka's and were named Jimi and Hendrix. They were the older twins, both eighty years old but looking more like fifteen. The daughters were Lara's and were named Stevie and Nix, Nixie to everyone that knew her. The girls were fifty years old but looked more like twelve. It goes without saying that their father was a big devotee of Earth music.

Max and Ada invited Rion, the trader, who was a frequent guest in their home. He turned up in his intergalactic cruiser accompanied by his lovely wife, Sattva. Rion always liked a party. 'It pays to mingle,' he often said. Rion's main business with Max was trading skins for Fish. He expanded his trading portfolio when Max started using him as an agent trading the valuable Fish for a variety of goods with a clientele spread across many star systems.

All the visitors brought their own wams. It was quite a sight for the Earthlings as the folded-up wams levitated from the cargo area of the ships. They unfurled in mid-air supported solely by levitation rings. They then lowered themselves to the ground, in a predetermined spot, where they were pegged into place.

'We gotta get a few of those,' said Snake full of admiration.

'Me personally,' said Ace marvelling at the alien technology, 'I got my eye on one of them upside down Frisbees.'

6

As twilight descended, the wams began to fluoresce in soft pastel colours. Everyone converged on the dom. All the parked ships, which were scattered up and down the river, formed a large semi-circle over the river. They glowed softly, in warm colours, like chinese lanterns. The fire of the ancestors was lit in front of the west-facing wam of the setting sun, which was the largest in the dom and was used by everyone. The large west-facing flaps were pulled back, opening up the wam to the sunset and central fire.

The dom was arranged in a half-circle from point west, curving around through point south, to point east. On the northern side was the river with its

semicircle of glowing spaceships levitating just above it. From above, the spaceships and wams made a perfect circle.

In the afterglow of the sunset, Iapetus rose to speak.

'We honor the One who is the source of all.'

All the Rama repeated, 'We honor the One.'

Iapetus continued, 'It gladdens my heart to be here now with all of you.' He paused then carried on, 'Let us have our moment of remembrance.'

One by one the Rama called out the names of friends and relatives who have passed on. The Earthlings quickly picked up on the custom. When it came to Adam's turn, he called out the names of his parents and his sister. He also remembered Nancy, Doyle, and a hang-glider pilot called Ken. Griffin, Fin and Tip called out the names of their parents. Melvin couldn't think of anyone.

'What about me?' Carla whispered.

'You ain't dead,' he whispered back.

When everyone was done remembering, Iapetus spoke some more.

'Not everyone in this humble gathering knows why we chose this place. We came for the waves, the magnificent waves of Noosa.'

Melvin, the cameraman who worked in Hollywood for a substantial amount of time, turned to Jonesy, who sat next to him, and said,

'I'm big time into surfin, you know, Jonesy. I hung out all my spare time out at the 'Bu.'

Iapetus continued, 'That is what attracted us here in the beginning. Be that as it may, I would especially like to welcome our new friends from America and Sydney.' Everyone clapped. Iapetus, who was not fond of public speaking, rounded things out with, 'Each journey begins with the first step and mine is to yield to the next speaker.'

And so, the rest of the night was given to chance. Perhaps someone was going to speak, perhaps not. Everyone mingled and chatted in small groups. It was becoming a party. Lloyd brought the last three bottles of Grange and since no one else wanted to drink wine the Mecca crew had all the 'booze' for themselves, which suited them just fine. Jonesy brought some of Mexico's finest.

After a while, Noah stood up to speak. Everyone silenced.

'I would like to honor a special group tonight,' he began. 'As we are all aware, you are all here due to either being time chipped or being physically connected to someone who has been time chipped. All except three, that is.'

There were a couple of gasps heard around the gathering. Noah continued, 'Imagine knowing that the comet was going to hit. The government knew and put into action a well organised survival plan, which plucked preselected individuals out of the population and took them one mile underground into a huge, self-sufficient, survival base. When the comet hit, the subsequent earthquakes caved in a portion of the base, the portion that offered the only way out via three lifts, causing the people inside to become entombed forever with no hope for escape. They accepted their fate and continued to live in the technologically advanced base, er, for that time. As the decades passed, they had children, and their children had children, and so on. Gradually, knowledge of the surface was forgotten. This erasure of reality was choreographed by the military that ran the base. By the fourth generation all knowledge of any other reality other than the base was gone. The base became the whole universe for them.'

You could hear a pin drop. Noah continued,

'Now imagine one of the first generation secretly writing a journal full of wisdom and stories of a place called the surface. For five generations this journal was passed from father to son in complete secrecy, particularly from the military. It was read to the children at night and it was, in general, thought of as myth. However, there was one young man, whose name was Griffin, who believed that the stories in the journal were real and true. He confided in his neighbor whose name was Rip. Because Rip was a working mechanic in the base, he had full knowledge of the life-sustaining machinery within it. He knew about the caved-in section and the three lift wells that connected the base with the surface. He did not know the extent of the cave-in nor whether the lift shafts were intact, but he got the idea into his head that there could be a tiny chance for escape. So, because he reckoned that he was too old and set in his ways to do it himself, he trained his daughters, Tip and Fin, and their best friend, Griffin, his neighbor's son, in the skills that would be required to make an effective escape.' Noah paused, smiled, shook his head and sighed, 'I know ... it's quite a story.'

'My God!' whispered Lucy.

Noah continued,

'Rip prepared them well. He dressed them in well-designed overalls and masks, which protected their sensitive skins from the surface environment. As well, he supplied them with food and water, and an array of useful equipment.

'It should be noted at this point that the base was on its way out. The machinery was wearing out and the filters were failing. Rip knew that the base was dying and that the time for the escape attempt had come. He set the kids up, wished them good luck and sent them on their way.

'They set off digging through the cave-in. They did not know how far they would have to dig, they just started digging.' Noah had an emotional pause. Gathering himself he went on, 'Anyway, I'll cut the story short, they can tell you the details, but they dug their way through and found an undamaged lift-shaft. They then climbed one mile up the shaft to the surface.

'The important thing is to understand what these three heroes represent. They represent what is left of eight billion people, not counting the time shifters. They are the last three left. Their line passed through the extinction and, furthermore, survived for a century like a dormant seed buried one mile underground waiting for the right moment to germinate.

'Tonight, we honor the unbroken line of the valiant Earth-human species by honouring Griffin, Tip and Fin, who fortuitously dwell with us now. We also honor Rip, the architect of the escape, and we do not wish to forget RG3, the last president of the United States, and the writer of a journal full of mythical tales of a place called the surface.

'Also, I feel that the designers of the base, the visionaries, deserve to be honored by us as well, because they succeeded in making that base last a hundred years and ultimately produce three survivors. So, we recognise the planners who, regrettably, are all long time departed from this realm.

'One final true hero of this story is a horse, a great stallion named Fury, without whose courageous intervention our noble trio might have been eaten by a pack of coyotes. I do believe that Fury is not here tonight though ...'

Everyone turned suddenly as they heard a loud whinny from the back of the dom. There was Fury with his seven fillies by his side letting everyone know that he was part of this gathering as well.

Griffin, Fin and Tip were becoming a trifle embarrassed by now. They weren't used to so much attention. Noah looked in their direction, gestured and said,

'I think it is time.'

All the Rama moved to the centre of the dom. The Americans and the Mecca crew caught onto what was going on and joined the Rama in forming two parallel lines. Everyone put their hands up forming an arched tunnel then invited the trio, and Fury, to pass through.

An honoring was an ancient tradition amongst the Rama. Mostly it was done to children for their outstanding achievements. The main part of it, which they called 'the passing through', included a powerful telepathic element of centering. Mentally speaking, it was not unlike tuning a seven-string guitar.

As Griffin, Fin and Tip entered the tunnel, the Rama broke into a harmonic chant. Fury followed them through. They all experienced a blissful balancing of their being as they passed each singing Rama.

The Americans and the Mecca crew patted them on the back, as they passed by, and said things like,

'Well done' and 'good show'.

As was the custom, each of the Rama came to Griffin throughout the night and gave him a gift. Ambriel gave him an intricately carved gold box full of Mana. Adam gave him a pipe to smoke it with.

Max and Ada's gift was a levitating disc, which was big enough for three people and a little cargo. Unfortunately, it was telepathically controlled so Griffin would have to learn how to use it. As it turned out, he became the first American to receive a disk, and none of the others could fly it.

Such were the bounties of an honouring.

7

The night was warm. Many were barefoot. They wore casual summer clothes, shorts and T-shirts. Cowboy and Melvin wore their jeans. Some of the Rama women were dressed in very elegant silk garments of many subtle shades, which accentuated their flowing movements. Griffin, Tip and Fin wore their black, NASA shorts and T-shirts, which they usually wore under their overalls.

Rion was immediately drawn to Mecca seeing as he had a boat of his own back on Rama. He admired its lines and sought out its owner. He approached Lloyd unassumingly and commented,

'Nice boat.'

'Oh, thanks,' Lloyd replied knowing that he was talking to a Rama he had never met before. 'Built her myself.'

'I have about a forty-five-foot cat,' said Rion.

'Mecca's only 28,' said Lloyd, 'but she swings a big bat for a small sheila.'

'Timber,' observed Rion.

'A variety of them,' Lloyd replied.

They shared a long conversation describing each other's boats to each other, as well as their sailing grounds. A friendship, destined to last for centuries, began that night. After hearing of the types of speeds the catamarans did, Lloyd all of a sudden got the urge to build one sometime in the future, when things settled down.

'I know a master boatbuilder who would get a big kick out of coming to Earth and building a big cat with you,' said Rion. 'His name is Powter and he lives on his own island called Engadine. The island is a fantastic place to visit in a boat. He makes beautiful catamarans out of timber. There is a story about his grandfather. It says that he came to Earth and taught the Vikings how to build their longboats. While he lived amongst them, he is said to have fathered many children with many wives. His sons became the great Viking explorer kings who made themselves wealthy beyond measure.'

'I have often wondered where they came from,' said Lloyd.

'Where who came from darling,' said Eva butting in.

'The Viking kings, my precious,' Lloyd replied. 'Have you met Rion, who is also a sailor, albeit on another planet.'

'Wonderful pastime, enriching,' she said rather cheerfully.

Lloyd realised that she was mildly under the weather. He enquired, 'By the way, my sweet, have you seen Alex and Sophia?'

'Oh, you know Alex and Sophia,' she replied frivolously, 'they're miiingling somewhere.'

Alex and Sophia were mainly hanging around people they knew. Alex swapped stories with Adam, Ben and Zeke, while Sophia engaged Ambriel in a conversation about shoes.

The most popular question for Zeke that night was regarding the progress of his manually-controlled, levitating disc. He said that his disc wasn't round like the telepathic ones. It was triangular with three sets of opposing gravity sails set into each point of the triangle. The trick was to balance the three vectors of lift and do it manually with a joy stick and cables. That was Zeke's style.

When asked how fast his triangular disc would go, he replied,

'Not as fast as the telepathic ones, they do two hundred. Mine'll do about half that. I thought about makin her go faster but I decided against it. She's plenty fast enough.'

Zeke hadn't seen Lucy for a hundred years and they clung to each other like Siamese twins. She really loved the designer side of him.

In another part of the gathering, Snake, Jonesy and Melvin tossed around the best way to hunt kangaroos. Mevin thought that a crossbow would give them a sporting chance, however Snake and Jonesy were far more practical.

'You wanna put a .44 right through his brain,' said Snake. 'Shootin em with an arrow would just make em suffer.'

'I'm with Snake on this one, Melv,' said Jonesy, 'an I'd want a good scope as well.'

'Well,' said Melvin, 'at least the crossbow is silent.'

'I got silencers,' said Snake.

Jonesy asked, 'Feel like a smoke?'

Melvin replied, 'Don't mind if I do.'

Some of the women of the American camp were gathered together, whispering and giggling, comparing notes about their men. It seemed to them like the old codgers had developed a little more 'spark' since they started smoking that Mana, although none of the women complained.

Ace picked Zeke's brain about lev-packs and his new triangular disc. He told him that he was a helicopter pilot and that he was having a hankering to get back in the air. That was when Zeke blew everyone away by springing his surprise. He brought out two shiny, brand new, lev-packs.

'I bought you a couple of gifts,' he said. 'One's for the Americans and one's for the Mecca crew.' He handed one to Snake and the other to Lloyd.

Everyone was over the moon all of a sudden. The men all shook his hand and the women all hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. They all left it up to Snake to express their undying gratitude in a speech.

8

The Rama were very aware of potential psychological problems that could have developed with the transplanted Earth humans. They particularly kept a telepathic eye on the Americans and the Mecca crew and watched for signs of panic or depression. In terms of the Earthlings' psychological health, Zeke's gift of the two lev-packs was the perfect medicine. Learning to fly the contraptions distracted them from negative thoughts and gave them hope for the future. The Rama always knew that the shift would be challenging for the Earthlings and they planned a continuing sustained support until they completely adjusted to the new reality.

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Chapter Eighty-Eight

THE MARY VALLEY

1

The final two months of 2123 saw everyone settling into the routine of camp life. They supplemented their survival food with seafood and wild game. Melvin was the best hunter. He chose to hunt with a crossbow. He found an almost inexhaustible supply of wild turkeys, rabbits, goannas and snakes. At first everyone was a little squeamish about eating reptile meat, however Snake changed their minds with his 'Mojave' barbeque technique, which turned the meat into delicious crispy strips. In the end the reptile meat became everyone's favourite delicacy. Also, hunting down a good percentage of the poisonous snakes around the settlement made life there a little safer for everyone.

2

Within weeks of the great time shift more Rama ships began to arrive. The first wave of ships belonged to *the Masons*. They were an ancient order of master stonecraftsmen whose chief task was to fine-tune the planet's natural vibrations through the repair and reconstruction of all the giant megalithic structures located at various strategic locations.

This tuning was primarily, but not exclusively, related to planets inhabited by telepathic beings. Uninhabited planets in the same star system were also tuned. That is why there were pyramids on Mars, Venus and the far side of Earth's moon. Finer tuning was achieved with smaller structures such as, for example, Stonehenge, Gobekli Tepe, the Easter Island Moai and the Phobos monolith.

A planet was tuned to harmonise on two levels. Firstly, it needed to be in harmony with the telepathic being's vibration in order to be gemutlich. Secondly, it needed to be in sync with all other celestial bodies. This sacred consonance was known as *musica universalis* or *music of the spheres*. This tuning made no difference to sub-telepathic creatures, though, as they all naturally vibrated at a much lower frequency.

The Earth had been tuned some eleven thousand years before, during a previous visitation of telepathic beings, however those structures had deteriorated through the millennia and needed to be refurbished. The comet

strike, with its associated earthquakes and tidal waves, made a particular mess of them.

The Masons of Rama should not be confused by a clandestine organisation that called itself the Freemasons, which existed on Earth prior to the comet strike. These people, although having a long history, were nonetheless nothing more than parodies of the true Masons. They were neither telepathic nor did they possess any of the secret knowledge, or capabilities, of the *bona fides*. In modern times, the Rama were indifferent to the Freemasons in the same fashion they were indifferent to all government and military personnel. They routinely gave them a wide berth.

The Masons arrived in large ships equipped with advanced tractor beams and stone cutting tools that included the *cleaving ray*, which was a beam that cut through stone like a hot knife through butter.

They cut enormous blocks of stone, some weighing over a hundred tons, neutralised their mass and levitated them into position. The overall designs of their structures, and the precise shape of each stone, were stored in the computer named *Crystalis*, which was located on planet Rama. This computer was telepathically accessible by all the Rama from anywhere in the cosmos. Over a period of a few months, all the giant pyramids on Earth were restored to their original perfection and the planet began to sing again.

As a point of note, it was *Crystalis* that calculated the flight path of Travers' Comet, and the precise moment and pinpoint location of its impact, roughly six thousand years before it happened.

3

During the time of the Masons' presence on Earth, Ambriel and Adam, and Thebe and Slater, designed and built their houses in their chosen locations. Adam and Ambriel chose Dolphin Point for theirs and Slater and Thebe chose Granite Point, above the break, for theirs. The houses were built out of huge granite blocks that were cut from a quarry on top of an exposed volcanic core that was once part of The Glasshouse Mountains. It was located about fifty miles southwest of Noosa. The huge blocks were levitated into position, one by one, and fitted together, without mortar, so precisely that one could not have passed a razor blade between them if one tried.

Adam and Slater's houses were built in typical Rama style. They incorporated large garages for the parking of their space ships and flying discs, as well as those of their regular visitors.

Crystal-clear fresh water permanently flowed through the houses via incorporated viaducts and channels. The water flowed from springs, just behind and above the houses, which were created by the splitting of the granite bedrock down to the water table. Natural earth pressure forced the water to the surface. This system was identical to the one the Rama originally incorporated in Machu Picchu, many, many millennia before.

From their veranda on Dolphin Point, Adam and Ambriel could monitor the surf both at Teatree and Granite. Slater and Thebe enjoyed the same luxury from their house. They rarely missed it when it got good.

Lucy and Zeke built their house next to Slater and Thebe's, although they spent only part of their time there. The other part was spent on Rama where their favourite activity was exploring the planet in Zeke's newly-designed, manually-controlled, terrestrial ship. It appeared from the outside the same as the intergalactic cruisers, however it could not safely leave the planet because true space flight and navigation required the pilot to be telepathic.

4

It turned out that the Mecca crew wasn't quite as enchanted with Noosa as they first thought they might be. For a start they weren't surfers. Also, they found the climate to be quite warm and the summer hadn't even arrived.

'I miss Sydney Harbour and The Hawkesbury,' Lloyd confessed. Everyone agreed with him.

Their boredom was cut short however. Rion, Lloyd's new friend, after speaking with Max, suggested that perhaps the four of them might like to visit Rama. He told them that he asked Max if he could borrow his family cruiser, to which Max agreed. The big ship had more than enough space for everyone. Rion suggested that while on Rama they might fly out to the island of Engadine to meet Powter and check out his catamarans.

It is impossible to describe in words how excited Lloyd, Alex, Eva and Sophia were at the prospect of visiting another planet, 'in another ruddy galaxy,' Lloyd exclaimed.

5

Griffin, Fin and Tip kept odd hours due to the sensitivity of their skins and eyes. Each sunrise drove them into their tent where they slept through the days not waking until about an hour before sunset. As they adapted to conditions, they gradually increased their exposure to daylight.

It turned out that both Noah and Thebe took it upon themselves to train Griffin in the telepathic arts. The various exercises were particularly fresh in Thebe's mind as she had recently been involved with training Slater. Griffin was an excellent student who progressed with outstanding speed.

Griffin and the girls' favourite activity, other than practising flying with the lev-pack, was riding horses. Griffin learnt much from Cowboy who could ride a horse like he was born in the saddle. Cowboy used his skill well in his chosen profession as an actor. He utilised some rope he found in the container and made up bridles in the fashion of Native Americans of old. The specific design he chose was what was known as a war bridle. This was simply a cord, usually made from hide but in this case made from marine rope, which was looped around the lower jaw of the horse and controlled with two reins.

They rode bareback. Griffin only rode Fury while the girls rode Fury on occasion and some of the fillies the rest of the time. Cowboy only got to ride the oldest filly, but he didn't mind.

In time, Griffin began riding Fury without a bridle and reins. He communicated with the horse mainly through telepathics, as well as light pressure with his feet. The horse and man became as one, perfectly united in the mind plane.

As Griffin's telepathic skills improved, he began practising flying the levitating disc, which was the gift from Max and Ada. In years to come, that disc transported Griffin, Tip and Fin right around the coast of the whole Australian continent. They loaded up with tents and camping gear they borrowed from Snake and took off for long adventures searching for incredible places to stop. For obvious reasons, for them the surface was much more interesting than for everybody else.

6

Jonesy's wife, Lori, was a salt-of-the-earth, strong, Christian woman. Seeing the cohabitation of her daughter, Carla, with Melvin, as well as the twins, Fin and Tip, with Griffin, she suggested to Jonesy that perhaps he ought to organise a couple of weddings to make everything right and proper in the sight of the Lord. 'Do it in good time, father, so you won't be needing to break out the shotgun,' she told him in good humor.

Jonesy, the perennial procrastinator about such things, finally asked Snake if he could do something about it, 'seein as you're the big honcho,' he told him.

They decided to have the double wedding on Christmas Day 2123. Everyone was there. The girls were dressed in beautiful white dresses and they wore lovely flowers in their hair. Snake kept it simple.

'Do you love each other?' he began.

'Yes,' they all answered in unison.

'Well then, on the Lord's birthday and in His sight, I pronounce you husbands and wives.' The husbands kissed their wives. Snake protested in jest, 'Hey, I ain't said that part yet.' Everyone laughed. 'Oh, go ahead then,' he kidded, 'and get on with the mooshy stuff.'

'You want we should start throwin the rice, hon?' asked Trixie.

'Time's as good as ever, cupcakes,' he replied.

Everyone cheered and showered the happy couples with rice they got from their stores in the container. The celebration was as happy an event as had ever been. The fact that Griffin was married to inseparable twins drew him closer to Albion, the brother of Ambriel and son of Max and Ada, who was married to the twins Evka and Lara. A great friendship was forged that day, which would see Griffin and his wives spend plenty of their time on Rama as favoured guests of the Sailsmith family. During those periods they were away, Fury and his harem reverted to life in the wild. Their place of preference was the beautiful Mary Valley where Fury's herd grew to over a hundred horses. He chased the brumby stallion and his mares clear out of the valley and into the next valley where they, and their progeny, thrived for centuries to come.

As 2124 rolled around, the Americans began exploring the surrounding countryside. As Griffin learnt to fly his levitating disc, Snake and Jonesy got him to fly them over the Mary Valley on exploratory excursions.

Every night around the campfire, Lori talked to Jonesy about a nice place to settle down, a little house by a stream, with some chickens and maybe a cow or two, and a couple of hogs.

‘Where we gonna find a cow, sweetheart?’

‘I doubt they left cows out of their plans,’ she replied, ‘and goats and geese.’

‘We got plenty of seed stock,’ said Jonesy.

Griffin, Snake and Jonesy explored the whole Mary Valley from north to south. The valley was about 25 miles long. It extended from where Gympie used to be, southwards to where Kenilworth used to be. At its widest point it was about five miles wide. The Mary River snaked down the middle of it the whole way and the rich brown topsoil either side of the river was as deep and fertile as any on the planet. Running up and down either side of the valley were two ranges of green hills of about one thousand feet in height with a few reaching about fifteen hundred feet. Due to its location in the subtropical zone, and its abundance of sunshine and rainfall, the Mary Valley remained in a permanent state of lushness year-round. In fact, it was so beautiful everywhere one looked, that it was easy to imagine that a little piece of heaven itself had been transplanted there.

A decision was made that after a while, when they received more help from the Rama, the Americans would settle in the Mary Valley. They adopted a lifestyle not dissimilar to the early settlers of the American west, aided by Rama technology such as gravity-powered water wheels and electricity generators. They also, in time, acquired a number of flying discs as well as personal lev-packs for each of them. But despite all these technological marvels, everyone gradually copied Griffin and began getting around on horseback.

The relationship between the humans and the horses turned out to be one of perfect symbiosis, especially during times when one of the animals required some veterinary care. Fury understood that humans had hands and horses didn’t, and thus humans could do things horses couldn’t, like repairing a cracked hoof or assisting with the delivery of a newborn foal.

The horses were also given supplements of Mana that were inserted in treats like apples and carrots. The Mana kept them very healthy and extended their lifespans tenfold.

The first Mana to be grown on Earth was grown in the Mary Valley. It was planted in various locations and quickly spread wild all over the valley. The manufacture of the brown crumble was administered by Jonesy with a substantial amount of assistance from his friend, Zeke. They used the Moroccan technique of 'extracting the soul from the plant.'

In the years to come, the Americans traded their Mary Valley Mana far and wide, across many star systems, for things they could have never even imagined.

With the help of newly-arrived Rama families that settled nearby, the Americans planted every type of fruit tree all over the valley. These naturally spread their seeds until the whole valley became one natural fruit orchard. If one wanted an apple, as an example, he would put on his lev-pack, fly to the apple tree and pick the apple out of the canopy, Rama style.

The women harvested reeds from the reed beds along the river. They dried and wove the reeds into what ended up looking like Vietnamese-style conical hats that protected the wearers from the strong sun as well as shielded them from the subtropical rains. In the end everyone wore them and the hats became a traditional style for a resident of the Mary Valley.

The women also wove linen from the Flax plants they grew from seed that was brought over in the shipping container. The standard garments they made from this linen were undyed, loose fitting, short and long-sleeved shirts as well as short, three-quarter-length, and full-length pants with string tied waists. These proved to be durable and pleasantly cool during the hot summers.

To see a Mary Valley resident astride bareback upon their mighty steed, in the hot midday sun, dressed in his linen and Vietnam hat, was a sight indeed, not quickly forgotten by any visitor, be it from up or down the coast *or* from another planet.

Clara, Catherine and Connie, the youngest three of Jonesy's girls all married young Rama boys who migrated to Earth with their parents. Through careful telepathic midwifery, the three girls all gave birth to many children who were all

fully telepathic. The non-telepathic embryos were aborted not long after conception.

All the Earth women became pregnant many times over as the decades and centuries passed. Their children were non-telepathic. All the American men, as well as Lloyd and Alex, became fathers many times over. When one of their non-telepathic children married a full telepath, the offspring was always fully telepathic. And thus, the humans of Earth gradually all became full telepaths, just like all the humans of Rama.

The non-telepaths were never made to feel inferior by the telepaths, although they were, but were always loved and cared for, not unlike how one loves one's pet dog or cat. Any negative thoughts that might have crossed the non-telepathic mind were quickly erased through telepathic means. In this way it was possible for the two levels of humans to live in happy, uncomplicated harmony. The non-telepaths never had the slightest inkling of what was being done to them.

In summary, they continued to live on Earth, masters of the natural environment, in total harmony, without ever building one fence or road.

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Chapter Eighty-Nine

HOKULEA

1

Lloyd, Eva, Alex and Sophia were all stunned speechless as they descended through Rama's atmosphere into the Eos Valley.

'Oh my God this is beautiful, Rion,' exclaimed Eva totally blown out.

'It's not unlike Switzerland,' Lloyd observed. He was measurably more composed.

'Is it? I've never been to Switzerland,' Rion replied.

'So, let me get this straight, Rion,' said Alex bemused, 'we've been floating in this can for an hour watching the fancy TV playing back a psycho-delic version of 2001 A Space Odyssey, and now you want us to believe that we are two million light years from where we started?'

'Give or take,' replied Rion cool as Clint from any movie you'd like to choose.

'So,' said Lloyd, 'if we could see Earth through a very powerful telescope, we would see it as it was two million years ago?'

'That's right, Lloyd, that is how it is in the physical plane. That is where the brain exists. In the mind, however, it is right now everywhere, all the time. So, if you could see Earth as it is in the mind plane, and you *could* with training, you would see it as it is right now, which is how it always is.'

'You mean, *right now*,' asked Eva, 'not two million years ago?'

'Precisely,' Rion replied.

'Right now,' Sophia sighed, 'I wish we had just one more bottle of Grange.'

Alex chuckled, 'The booze is gone lambchop, but we do have that little present we received from Jonesy that we haven't tried yet.'

'Oh *God*,' Sophia exclaimed dramatically, 'now we are all going to become *potheads*!'

Lloyd chuckled and said, 'We'll have to break out the beads.'

'And tie-dyed T-shirts,' added Alex.

'Oh my God, look at that waterfall,' exclaimed Eva looking ahead into the spherical holographic display.

‘Those are the Eos Falls,’ Rion announced, ‘and that house right on top of them is our destination.’

2

After spending a couple of days as guests of the Sailsmiths, they continued their journey in the family cruiser and flew some fifteen hundred miles north to Rion’s house where they stayed a couple more days enjoying the hospitality of Rion and his lovely wife, Sattva. From there they flew south again, to the coast of the Eos Valley, where Rion showed them the overall geography of the area and the beginning of the island chain called *The Pearly Islands*.

‘There are thirty-three of them,’ explained Rion, ‘and Engadine is the last, and smallest, one.’

‘Are they named The Pearly Islands because they are lined up like a string of pearls?’ asked Eva.

‘Good chance,’ replied Rion, ‘although no one can be sure because they’ve been The Pearlies for longer than history.’

‘I see,’ said Eva.

‘They certainly are beautiful the way they stretch out over the horizon,’ said Lloyd.

‘Everyone ready to go and see Powter?’

Everyone said, ‘Yes.’

‘I’ll fly slowly so that you can get a bit of a look at each island.’

Everyone said, ‘Thank you, Rion.’

The Pearly Islands stretched out for nearly five hundred miles in a due-easterly direction from the Eos Valley.

Rion chose to fly at about four hundred miles per hour intending to reach their destination in about one hour. ‘I have sailed out this way more times than I can count,’ he said. ‘There are some incredible anchorages along the way. I’ll circle around a few of the finer ones so that you may see them better.’ He flew around a number of secluded bays with pristine beaches and small settlements, and the occasional anchored sailing boat.

‘These are truly sublime sailing grounds, Rion,’ said Lloyd who was in complete awe, as were his companions.

Eventually, they finally spotted the island of Engadine. All the other islands were between ten and thirty miles apart, however Engadine was separated from the thirty-second island, named Austinmer, by a fifty-mile stretch of deep water. As they approached it, they could plainly see that it was much smaller than all the other islands. As they got closer still, they observed that the island was actually split in half, into two smaller islands only touching each other at one point on the southern side.

'It's small,' said Alex, 'and split in two.'

'Yes, six miles east to west and two miles north to south,' Rion replied. 'It is so small that only Powter and his family live on it. Years ago, nobody can be sure when actually, it is believed that the island got split in half by a meteor. It created the deep crater that is now a perfect sheltered anchorage and harbor. Everyone who visits anchors their boat there because the harbor is so well protected from all wind and swell directions.'

'It looks perfect,' exclaimed Lloyd. 'It reminds me a little of Lord Howe Island back on Earth. Don't you think so sweetheart?'

'Yes indeed,' Eva replied, 'the central spine makes it look very similar.'

They were approaching slowly, still maintaining an altitude of about two and a half thousand feet.

'My God your planet is beautiful,' marvelled Sophia.

'You mentioned Powter's family, Rion,' said Eva in an enquiring tone.

'Yes, I did. Powter lives with his wife, Laura, and his son, Sasha. Other than the animals that live there, Powter's family are the sole residents on the island. It is quite small and no one else would ever even consider trying to move there. All visitors are always very welcome, though, and it is a favorite destination for all sailing folk of our region.'

3

The large intergalactic cruiser came in for a landing alongside a jetty that was located in the western, most sheltered, side of the lagoon. Rion parked the ship levitating about ten feet above the water. A hatch opened and lowered itself as a ramp onto the jetty, almost but not quite touching it. They all stepped outside.

It was the middle of the day. There was a warm breeze blowing from the north. The sky was a bright blue patchwork of cumulus. Tied up at the end of the

jetty was Powter's huge catamaran. On the land side of the jetty was a sheltered valley that was surrounded by steeply-rising, rocky hills.

'That is Powter's house,' said Rion pointing at a dwelling half buried into the side of a hill. He then pointed at a separate building, near the water, which was quite large and open on two sides, and said, 'And that over there is his workshop where he builds his boats.' He pointed to the other side of the house and explained, 'That hole in the wall next to his house is his garage where he parks his ships and discs.'

'This is all quite amazing,' said Lloyd.

As they stood there on the jetty, they were startled by a loud swooshing sound. Everyone looked up to see what it was.

'Oh my God, Lloyd,' Eva exclaimed, 'it's someone in one of those hanglidimijigs like we used to see on our drives in the Aston.'

'That is Powter, my friends,' explained Rion, 'the sole hang glider pilot on Rama.'

They watched in awe as Powter stylishly pulled up out of his downwind dive, performed a 180-degree hammer turn barely one hundred feet above the deck, and finally flared into a no-step landing right in the middle of the grassy valley. His visitors all gave him a round of applause while calling out, 'bravo' and 'magnificent' and such things. As they walked off the jetty towards him, they watched him turn the glider back to the wind, park it tail-down, and casually step out of his simple, knee length, apron harness.

After all the introductions, Powter invited them all to lunch. They met his family and discussed a range of topics, the main one being boats and sailing. To Lloyd's question about his hang gliding, Powter replied,

'Many years ago, I visited your planet. As it happened, right at the time of my visit your young men and women were beginning to take to birdlike flight. In stealth, as was the protocol, I came to one of the foci of this activity and stayed there for a few months. The place was located on the east coast of Australia and was called Stanwell Park. I must say that it was a most magnificent haven for coastal soaring. While there, I befriended two brothers, known as *The Brothers Daniel*, who were two of the most talented pilots of the time. They built hang gliders through their company called *Skytrek*. They never suspected that I was

from Rama. I learnt to fly and I bought two hang gliders from them, which I subsequently brought back with me when I returned to Rama. Both gliders are *Probes*, arguably the finest coastal soaring wings ever made. It is the way they handle that sets them apart.

‘Unfortunately, gravity flight relegated aerodynamic flight into extinction on this planet, but I have brought the artform back to life. I know that the young Rama will take to it because of the way they love surfing and sailing. I plan to manufacture copies of the Probe right here in my workshop.’

‘I admire your passion,’ said Lloyd.

4

‘We began wondering what we would do with ourselves,’ explained Eva as they all walked down the jetty towards Powter’s catamaran. ‘We are not surfers, you see, and the Noosa settlement is mostly about that.’

‘If anything, we are sailors, er, sailing folk, like you and Rion,’ explained Lloyd choosing to not mention their academic careers.

‘Yes,’ continued Eva, ‘and we heard about you and your fast cats that you construct and we hoped to meet you and see one of these wonderful craft for ourselves.’

‘And Rion kindly offered to bring us here,’ said Alex.

‘For which we are immeasurably grateful,’ added Sophia.

As they approached the vessel, Powter began describing it.

‘The hulls are eighty feet long. As you can see, they are a very slim, wave-cutter design with substantially kicked up bows and sterns. They are connected by the two highly-arched crossbeams, which are spaced forty feet apart. At the highest point the arches are fifteen feet above the water. The beam of the boat is forty feet as well.’

‘Your boat is wider than ours is long,’ commented Lloyd. He could hardly believe what he was looking at. To him Powter’s cat looked like something out of a sci-fi movie. Powter continued his description.

‘The cabin that you can see at the top of the arches is forty feet long, by twenty feet wide. It is shaped for aerodynamic efficiency. The single mast is cantilevered off the anterior crossbeam. The sail is a symmetrical, double-surfaced, wing sail, which rises out of its enclosure on the top of the cabin. It

incorporates a set of rigid, aerodynamically-shaped battens in each surface. The wing-sail can be opened up, wing-on-wing, for downwind running.'

'That is Lloyd's favourite kind of sailing,' said Alex.

'What is her name?' asked Sophia.

'Her name is Hokulea,' replied Powter.

Almost speechless, Lloyd declared, 'This is the most incredible, futuristic boat I've ever seen in my life, Powter, and I've seen my share. How do you do it?'

'Passion, Lloyd, it is what I love to do. I'm so glad you like her. Let me show you the cabin.'

After Powter showed them the interior of the cabin and the controls, and a variety of other details, Lloyd declared,

'It is now officially my dream to build one of these space ships of the water, back on Earth, and sail the South Pacific in her.'

'A noble dream, Lloyd,' said Powter, 'and I am sure that I would love to assist you in your endeavor and even take the pleasure of some sails with you, with my family, when you finally have her ready to go.'

And thus, the dream was hatched. To build a trans-oceanic catamaran to sail to all the hidden places of the vast South Pacific Ocean.

5

That night they were all invited to stay for dinner. Rion zipped up the coast in the big ship and picked up Sattva and brought her back to the party.

Powter's house was half buried within a steep, rocky hill, half cantilevered out over the v-shaped grassy valley. A natural stream permanently flowed through the house via special channels and viaducts all incorporated into the architectural design. A cantilevered, semi-circular, stone veranda extended from the exposed valley-side of the house. It seamlessly connected with the internal living space. It looked straight out, northwards, towards the jetty and the lagoon beyond it. To the left and right were the steeply-rising, craggy slopes of the main spines of the divided island.

In the centre of the veranda was a large, round, stone table, which was surrounded by heavy, wooden chairs and benches that were carved in intricate, Polynesian-style, patterns. In the center of the table was a fire pit full of glowing coals. It was covered with a metal grate.

Above the veranda, floating in the air like Chinese lanterns, were dozens of small, glowing spheres that as well as providing warm ambient light also played soft music that, to Lloyd and Eva, sounded not unlike Vivaldi.

'Oh my *God* this is beautiful,' Eva exclaimed.

'All that is missing is a nice bottle of Merlot,' quipped Alex.

'We mustn't complain,' said Sophia.

Powter overheard the comment and said, 'Well, finally, someone who may be able to educate us on all those bottles I have stored in the cellar.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Alex, 'did you say bottles? ... in the cellar?'

'I believe that is what he said,' said Lloyd trying to mask his sudden, eager attentiveness.

'Yes, that is what I said,' said Powter smiling. 'I traded them for a big bag of Cannabis when I was on Earth. Those hang glider pilots seemed very keen to make the trade, so I did it, although we have not sampled any of them yet.'

'You haven't?' exclaimed Eva.

'No.'

Sophia announced, 'I just want to warn our lovely hosts that I am a very cheap drunk.'

'The bottles have been lying in the cellar for over a century,' said Powter, 'so I don't know how good they will be.'

'Oh my *God*,' exclaimed Eva, 'hundred-year-old wine?'

6

As Laura and Sasha brought out two large trays full of a variety of seafood and vegetables, and a large bowl of salad, Lloyd and Powter disappeared into the cellar and returned with a few bottles of various wines.

'Seeing that it's a seafood barbecue,' said Lloyd, 'we got some Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir.' He turned to Powter and said, 'You have a very nice wine selection, sir.'

'Thank you, Lloyd, although much of the thanks should really go to my hang-gliding friends for their connoisseurship.'

Powter was the chef for the evening. He began grilling the seafood and vegetables right in front of everyone in the middle of the table, and when they

were done, he served them up on their plates one piece at a time, Japanese Teppanyaki style.

Right about the time everyone was on their second glass of Pinot Noir, the two moons rose above the eastern horizon. The guests all oohed and aahed at the magnificent sight.

'You know,' said Sophia, 'I had just about forgotten that I was not on Earth, until now.'

'Yes, I agree,' said Eva sitting next to her, 'those moons really bring it home that we feast under a foreign sky.'

'That is exactly how I felt on Earth,' said Powter.

7

As the years and decades passed, Lloyd, Eva, Alex and Sophia returned to the Hawkesbury and set up home in Bobbin Head. They received a constant stream of visitors, many of whom helped them with the construction of their houses. It was there that Lloyd, with the assistance of Powter, set up his boatyard where he eventually built his dream catamaran. He named it *Capricorn Dancer*, which was an idea given to him by his old friend, Adam, who told him the story of how he heard that name way back in his youth, in Byron Bay.

During all this time, Lloyd maintained the sloop, *Mecca*, in pristine condition. They loved to sail her around the Hawkesbury on day sails and Lloyd often let other people, like Alex or the kids, take her out without him. One of the favourite sails in *Mecca* was down to Sydney Harbour. They sailed down in a northeaster and came back in a southeaster. In time they built a house and jetty in Watson's Bay where they loved to sit outside in the winter afternoons and reminisce over some of the great times they had there in the old days, back at the old 'Watto Bay Pub.'

Over the decades and centuries, Lloyd and Eva, and Alex and Sophia, had many children. Some of Lloyd and Eva's kids married some of Alex and Sophia's kids and a small family community began to grow in Bobbin Head and Watson's Bay.

Within a couple of years of moving south from Noosa they received two manually-controlled, levitating discs, which were gifts from Max and Ada. They all also ended up owning their own levitation backpacks. With these they

achieved unprecedented mobility, which allowed them, amongst many other things, to make regular flying visits to Noosa where they stayed with their friends Adam and his son Ben. From there they often set off on interstellar adventures exploring and visiting uncountable exotic places.

8

As it turned out, young Ben ended up falling in love with, and marrying, Clara, Jonesy's second-oldest daughter. The Noosa community was very close and everyone got to know everyone else very well. Clara grew up from a rambunctious teenager into a stunningly-beautiful damsel who caught the eye of many a young buck. However, it was Ben who stole her heart, primarily with his witty humor. The wedding, which was held in the Mary Valley, was a wonderful affair to which absolutely everyone came. Over the decades and centuries, they spawned many children all of whom were born full telepaths thanks to Raman telepathic midwifery. They lived part-time on Earth and part-time on Rama. They travelled on uncountable adventures together, to many, many planets, where they often made lifelong friends.

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Chapter Ninety
SOME KIND OF MAGIC

1

Adam silently snaked up the Mystic River towards Mimo's waterfall. He was flying in Zeke's manually-controlled, levitation disc, which he borrowed especially for this trip. The gritty determination he felt penetrating deeper into the mysterious Delphian Forest reminded him of the day he drove to Stanwell Park with the intent of launching from the big hill for the very first time. The fear and resolve he felt were the same.

He was on a mission to attempt the dangerous and difficult quickening into the mind plane, via the Fish. The objective was to become permanently telepathic in the same fashion that Griffin managed to do it. He understood that the experience could kill him, or worse it could leave him profoundly mad, totally crazed out of his mind. He understood that Fish was extremely powerful stuff and extremely dangerous, particularly for non-telepaths. He felt, though, that his limited experience with LSD and his extensive practical knowledge of Nitrous Oxide had prepared him, better than most non-telepaths, for the attempted initiation into the mind plane.

The dinghy skimmed a foot above the mirror surface of the river. Adam, from time to time, marvelled at the forest that surrounded him. He had never seen trees so tall in all his life. Although he couldn't remember ever being in a place like this, he nonetheless experienced flashes of *déjà vu*. As well, memories of Nitrous trips briefly surfaced into his consciousness. His mind began to drift, but he kept his cool. He got the feeling that maybe it was the place that was doing it, that maybe the whole forest was some kind of magic.

2

Over the years there had been much discussion between Adam and Ambriel about Adam passing through the Fish. She discouraged him at every opportunity. Sometimes she did not even wish to hear about it. As well, Ben discouraged his father, pleading with him to leave the idea alone. But Adam could not. It was as if he had drifted into a powerful vortex from which he was unable to break free. He wanted to be telepathic. He wanted to be like his wife and his son. He wanted to

fly his own ship and wear his own skin. He wanted to achieve all these things because Griffin had. And if Griffin could, surely, he could as well.

He had spoken at length to Rion and Griffin about Mimo and the location of her home in the upper reaches of the Mystic River. Rion described Mimo's waterfall to him and the small jetty on the bank of the river from which a path led to her stone cottage snuggled in the trifurcation of an elder tree.

3

They were visiting Rama. Adam waited for everyone to fall asleep before he sneaked out of the house and flew away in the disc. He took some food and water, and he 'borrowed' Ambriel's crystal container of Fish, which he thought he would not need. He had high hopes that he could pass through the initiation using Mimo's Fish, just like Griffin.

He flew down the Eos valley to the coast, then turned left and flew north to the Mystic River. From there he flew inland staying low above the surface of the water, like he was instructed, deep into the mysterious Delphian Forest.

It was simple, Rion told him, he had to keep following the river till he came to the waterfall, then it was just another couple of miles to the jetty. Rion explained to Adam how Griffin's meeting with Mimo was prearranged and how he wasn't sure whether she would be agreeable to seeing Adam without prior notice. Adam was very philosophical about the situation. He explained that worrying about such things is like worrying about dying. He said that he preferred to deal with it when it happened, not before.

Prior to putting all his hopes in Mimo, Adam begged Thebe to take him through the Fish. She flatly refused saying that it would have been highly dangerous and most likely fatal. She wanted no part of it. When Adam complained about her doing it for Lucy, Thebe explained that Lucy was a special case because she was a hybrid, an offspring from the union of an Earth mother and an alien father. Thebe explained that Lucy was already half telepathic before she passed through the Fish. It was at this point that Adam realised that Mimo, the medicine woman of the Delphian Forest, was his last and only hope.

4

After flying all through the second night, navigating by moonlight, of which there was not much under the dense canopy of the forest, and natural

phosphorescence, of which there was a ubiquitous abundance, Adam finally arrived at Mimo's waterfall, which he heard thundering from miles downriver. He flew into the roaring, mist-saturated cathedral of the waterfall where he got completely drenched, which didn't matter because he was in the tropics. After a pause to look around, he decided to fly the disc vertically up the front of the 300-foot-high cascade, and further up, and up, above the canopy of the trees and into the brilliant light of the sunrise. Up there, in the open space, he marvelled at the endless expanse of spaced-out elder trees with their enormous crowns high above the forest canopy. And up there, above the sentience of the planet, he experienced flashbacks to his time hang gliding high above the trees and cliffs and waterfalls of the Illawarra escarpment.

Adam did not remain up high for long, though. He remembered Rion warning him to stay low because the indigenous Ilf did not appreciate anyone venturing into their domain from above. He had a brief look around then descended back down below the canopy to the top of the waterfall. From there he slowly glided upriver looking for a jetty.

In all this time he had not seen one Ilf. He imagined that in such a vast jungle he was almost invisible, however he was mistaken. The jungle was full of eyes. His whole trip up the Mystic River had been under secret surveillance by many Ilf who were invisible to him because of their perfect camouflage.

5

The river was quieter up above the waterfall. All the mist and thunder receded into the distance as Adam glided upstream just above the now mirror surface. As he rounded a bend he came into a cove. He spotted a jetty up ahead, projecting out from a narrow beach. Standing on the jetty, Adam saw a woman who, even from a distance, appeared to be of advancing years. He approached slowly, trying his best to look friendly and non-threatening.

There was a boat tied to the jetty. It was low and round with a type of domed, canvas cover. He stopped his approach about twenty feet from the jetty and smiled and waved. To his relief, Mimo smiled back.

With absolutely no speech, just a wave of understanding, she conveyed to Adam that she knew everything about him and his reason for arriving.

6

She sat him down on a chair facing a wall. On the wall she drew a point, with a pencil, exactly at his eye level. She knew that he knew what to do. She placed another chair, which she would sit on, with its back to his. No words were spoken or would ever be spoken.

From a side table, she retrieved a small crystal container and opened it. With a fine set of silver tweezers, she took one grain of Fish, it was about the size of a grain of sugar, and placed it on Adam's tongue. She then took another grain and placed it on her own tongue and swallowed it. An understanding was given him that she would help him launch, however he would be on his own during the flight and the final landing. She would get him *in*, which was the hard, frightening part because every conceivable obstacle would be placed in his way to frighten and distract him, and deflect him from his goal. In his mind he understood all this to be quite normal, so he sat there, fully compliant and receptive, ready for the trance he imagined would come, ready for the distractions. He imagined it would come in a similar fashion it came with Nitrous Oxide.

He was calm and ready. He locked his gaze on the dot on the wall, straightened his spine and began to breathe his special breath. After so many years, he still knew exactly what to do.

First discipline
Stillness
Second discipline
Breath
Third discipline
Thought

To sit
At the feet of the Master
Silent and still
Focused
Silent and still
At the feet of the Master
Back straight
Mind focused
Breathing still
Not wanting anything
Not expecting anything
Not thinking

Mindset to

*I will not move
 No matter what happens
 I will not lose my concentration
 No matter what happens
 I will practice non-reaction
 No matter what happens
 Doing nothing
 Thinking nothing
 Not moving
 Not reacting
 Just being*

7

He zeroed in on the dot. He saw nothing but dot. As the Fish kicked in, he began to hear the rhythmic beat of a foreign planet. He felt a presence behind him. The eternal question was asked of him once again.

'Trust or don't trust?'

'Trust.'

It was as if his back opened up and an ancient entity, calm, brave and full of knowledge, entered into his being and merged with it. It was Mimo. Suddenly her knowledge became his knowledge. His focus became immovable and his back became ruler-straight like an iron bar. His breath became deeper, slower, smoother and more rhythmic. She was doing it through him, setting him up for the rush that was about to come like a damburst washing everything in existence away. For him it was like hanging onto a pole in the midst of a raging torrent. To let go, to lose his focus, to panic, to succumb to fear, was to drown.

There was an initial explosion, not around him, but him. *He* was the explosion. Every fiber of his being burst away from every other fiber and flew out into the vast void in an ever-expanding sphere.

He lost all construct of his own being. He expanded into the universe, and beyond, until *he* became the universe, every subatomic nanoparticle of it.

Gradually, the formlessness of light and darkness, and shade and color, began to coalesce into one infinite, spinning Mandelbrot set into which he began to fall. He fell and fell, seemingly forever, as the space around him twisted in torsional patterns impossible to describe with even the most advanced physics.

At one point everything suddenly stopped. He was in a kind of room, except it was a mock up of a room. The walls were made of tubular perimeter frames with white

canvas stretched within them with rope. The dimensions of the room looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't remember where. He saw a small gargoyle-like creature appear on top of one of the frames and grin at him. The canvas frames then morphed into actual walls, which formed an actual room that looked even more familiar, but he still couldn't make a connection. Suddenly, three demons appeared in front of him. They appeared as young men who were dressed and had extreme hairstyles and pierced jewelry like *Punks*. He sensed extreme malevolence from them. They frightened him to the core. From somewhere deep within, a passionate cry came for help.

'Jesus ... please save me ...'

In the next instant, a Lion, a huge Lion carrying three shields before Him, appeared behind him in his spherical vision. The Lion was all asserted and purposeful and in no mood for devils. With bold steps He strode forward, straight through him, and with the shields He pulverized those *Punks* into eternal oblivion. They were literally blown to smithereens, disintegrated.

A gentle rain began to fall and two nice ladies that shone in their own light, wearing long gowns, nurtured him and showed him kindness in a beautiful green meadow. And there was a babbling brook and he got down close to it and saw a green lizard resting on a damp stone there. And the forest was wet with rain all around him and he saw the first two fingers of his right hand morph into a little leprechaun who smiled at him.

He began to accelerate again, shrinking as he fractally torsioned through the Mandelbrot set into a universe within a singularity. By now, Mimo was long gone. He was on his own, and yet, he got a strong feeling that he wasn't on his own at all. He got the feeling that he had never, ever, been on his own.

8

Out of the fathomless infinitude he became reconstructed. The swirling mathematics gradually crystallized into form. The indefinable became time and space again. The dot, which was at the center of his unflinching focus, and the wall behind it, emerged out of the mist of a psychedelic mindscape.

The first thing he noticed was the rubber hose still being held in his mouth by his left hand. He calmly removed it and let his hand drop by his side, taking the hose with it. He next noticed the blue cabinet of the Nitrous Oxide machine that stood against the wall in front of him. He flipped the switch to 'off' like he had done so many times before.

The room was dark except for bands of light that filtered through a partially open venetian. It was silent. He thought maybe that a cassette may have played through, but he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure if there even was a cassette.

The next thing he noticed was that he was completely soaked-through with his own perspiration.

He stayed calm.

He looked left and recognized the antique dental cabinet that stood against the left wall. On top of it was an open appointment book. He noticed that the date was the *23rd of September 1975* and that there were no appointments booked for that day.

He stayed calm.

He looked right and saw the doorway that led to the small back room. He realized that he was in his surgery. He had not yet looked behind him. He hesitated. A wave of fear passed through him, but he fought it off. The fear came from the intense uncertainty he began to feel about whether he was in a trip or whether he had just come back from a trip. He couldn't tell what was real.

He summoned all his courage and turned around. There, lying comfortably in the patient's chair, was a tall, slender young girl with fire red hair, that was cut short, and perfect Celtic skin. Her eyes were closed and she was holding a rubber hose in her mouth. It appeared to him that she was blissfully tripped out on Nitrous Oxide. She was completely serene and she seemed to be in total control. He thought he saw a subtle glow about her, a soft light, which appeared to be emanating from her very being.

He shook his head because he couldn't believe his eyes.

He tried to remember the last time he spoke, or what he said, but he couldn't.

Almost as if it had a mind of its own, his mouth opened and uttered the word, 'Nancy?'

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THE END
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