

WTS

Watch This Space!

Written by Kaavan Cook

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Chapter 1 A surprise move

ENTRY 2105A – KAAVAN COOK: TERRA NOUVELLE: If these words appear on the cover of my book it is good news because my book has actually made it into the capsule. Let me explain. My name is Kaavan and I lived in the 22nd century. I say lived, because if you are reading this it is already the 23rd century and I no longer exist. I was asked in the year 2101 to keep a journal of my travels, which would be deposited in a capsule along with many other things depicting the time I live in. The hope was that after one hundred years someone would open it and find out what life was like right now. This story is about me (mostly) but it is also about my family and other families who took part in a very special voyage.

I'll start at the beginning because that is always the best place to start. I was 12 years old when my father came home from work one evening announcing he had some good news to tell us. He said he would talk to Mum first and after dinner sit down with us and discuss this great news. You might think I'd be excited by Dad's announcement, but for my Dad good news or even great news, might just mean he had a new job. It might also mean he had met up with an old school friend he knew a hundred years ago and this friend would be coming to stay with us for a while. None of this would be of much interest to my sister, Suezan or me.

Why the funny spelling of our names I hear you ask? Well as you probably already know, but just in case you don't, in the late 21st century it became law for everyone to have a different first name, that is, different from anyone else. This was the government's way of cutting out the massive amount of numbers a person needed to live on this planet. There were bank card numbers, social security card numbers, tax file numbers – you name it and it had a number. If you are Kaavan, like me, then that is who you are and it appears on everything. When Suezan was born Dad got onto the computer and keyed in Susan like he had keyed in Kevin after I was born. These were the names our parents picked for us. But as you can imagine they were already taken so we had to accept some more unusual spelling. But like everyone on Earth we are unique.

Getting back to the great news Dad said he had for us. We had dinner and I had forgotten about his announcement, so when it came time he had to call Sue and me from our bedrooms and we went and sat down together with Mum in the lounge room. Good news for me at that moment would have been being selected in the State schoolboys' cricket team. Finding out that the guys at school, who were giving me a hard time, had come down with a disease that would keep them from school for the remainder of term, would have been great news. I didn't want them to have anything life threatening, just something contagious that would keep them out of action for a while and out of my hair. As I sat down I thought that if the constitution could be changed to outlaw homework, this would be good news too.

Sue and I waited, showing our usual level of mediocre enthusiasm.

"Maybe we are going to get a dog," Sue had said to me earlier.

I told her I didn't think so. This would hardly be great news for Dad. We had many times promised that if we had a dog, Sue and I would do everything for it including feeding, brushing and walking it. But Dad had been strong in his "no" answer, saying that we would probably look after it for about a week before the

novelty wore off and he would be lumped with these duties on top of all the other things he did. Mum then pointed out that after the novelty had worn off with Dad she would be lumped with these duties as the most responsible person in the household. No one could argue with that.

Dad stood in front of us and after clearing his throat started off with the words, “How would you like?”

Now this is a bad sign because it means whatever it is will involve us and this will probably be something we wouldn’t like.

But he continued, “go on a trip?” Now this showed real potential. I liked trips.

“to *Terra Nouvelle*.”

Interesting! Where was *Terra Nouvelle* exactly? I didn’t have the foggiest. Sue and I sat looking at Mum who was smiling.

“I didn’t know where it was either,” she replied without us having to ask the question.

Dad answered, “Well it isn’t in Australia. It isn’t even on Earth. Hey, it isn’t even in our solar system.”

At this point I was a little concerned for the man talking to us. Was this really our father? Maybe he had been replaced by an alien or had suffered some sort of break down because he spent so much time at the office? But after hearing a little more I was convinced he was in his right mind and talking about a real trip: a trip and a half. It seems that *Terra Nouvelle* is about a light year away, give or take a few volts.

As Dad was talking I began to remember I had read about this place. I think what threw me was Dad’s pronunciation of the planet’s name. I hadn’t heard it spoken before, only seen it in writing. Unlike similar voyages to other planets like Mars and to the moons of Jupiter and even others much further off, whole families were being included in this voyage. This was because *Terra Nouvelle* was so far away from Earth that an ‘expedition group’ would not see their families for a number of years. This made it all the more exciting for me. We would be going to where no one had ever been before. We would be real explorers like Captain Cook or Matthew Flinders. These people I had been reading about in history classes.

After a couple of minutes of Dad telling us lots of things about the voyage and my mind racing to what this really meant for me, I began thinking about my friends here on Earth who I would miss greatly. I wouldn’t see them for years. Then suddenly all was quiet. Dad had stopped talking and was waiting for our responses. I looked up at him. He is a very large person when he is standing just a few feet away from you and you are sitting down. I remember thinking that he had very dark hair for his age and a strong square jaw and quite big ears. Would I look like him when I grew up? I could do worse I suppose. He spread out his hands and I noticed how big they were as well. I followed his hands as he gestured for some sort of answer.

The room remained silent for about a minute and then Dad said, “Well, what do you say?”

His words sounded like they were coming from the other end of a long tunnel.

I remember replying, “That is the best news.” It was definitely the best news Dad had ever given us.

“Can we think about it?” I asked.

“What is there to think about? We will never have an opportunity like this again.”

Dad had said the same thing when he announced that his old school friend would be staying with us, and also when he had taken a new job. And I remember they were the same words he used when he announced that Grandma would be staying with us for a week or two or three. Don't get me wrong I love Grandma but she can become a bit bossy if she stays too long.

For me it was great news – but it wouldn't be like going on a holiday, we would be away for years. Even using simple mathematics a light year away travelling at the speed of light would mean two years there and back. And the aim of the voyage wasn't to travel there and back, but for us, really Dad and the other workers, to set up a place for settlement on the planet. How long would that take? At this point I thought it was time to ask Mum what she thought. Mum is always a good one to turn to and a barometer on what would actually happen. When Dad had announced his school friend would be staying over, she just said “no” and that was it. When Grandma was going to stay, it was “yes” and Grandma stayed almost 2 months. I looked across at her. She had a gentle smile on her face and was looking up at Dad. I bet Mum was good looking when she was young. She isn't bad looking now for an older person. She has a nice friendly face and her short brown hair suits her because it is away from her face so you can see her bright eyes. I remember a teacher once saying to the class that a person should always show their eyes and not hide them behind their hair. I think it had something to do with not being able to trust someone who hid their eyes from view. Mum's hands were clasped together on her lap.

So my question was, “What do you think Mum?”

Straight away she said, “Dad and I made an agreement before we were married that I would go wherever his work took us. But this doesn't mean I don't want to go. I think it will be a great experience for all of us.”

How could I disagree with that? I was excited about going too and I told Dad so, besides it would rid me of those guys picking on me at school and maybe there wouldn't be homework in space. But I asked if we could have an hour or so to think it over. That wasn't a problem. I went to my room and Sue went to hers and then as I had predicted, two minutes later Sue came into my bedroom and asked me whether I wanted to go. As soon as I said it was a good idea she instantly agreed with me. Sue always agreed with me. Thinking back I wondered what would have happened if we hadn't wanted to go but that was not important now. Out of us all, Sue would have the worst time leaving Earth and her friends because of her younger age. She liked things to be settled.

Sue and I were still excited the next day and told our friends all about the voyage to come. However, after that we lived our normal lives for two weeks with not a lot happening on the voyage front. It was almost as though we had forgotten about it when Dad came home and announced everything was official and that we were really going. He also said he had some more good news for us. We had very quickly learned to listen to Dad intently now when he had any news at all to tell us.

He said to Sue and me, “In a week's time you will both be sleeping in a travel capsule just like the one you will have in space. This will get you used to it so you won't feel claustrophobic on board the *Investigator*.”

The Investigator was the spacecraft we would cruise to *Terra Nouvelle* in. It had been named after the ship Matthew Flinders circumnavigated Australia in, exactly 300 years ago. I was a bit disappointed. I thought it would be better if it was named the

Endeavour, which was Captain Cook's ship when he discovered Australia. But I was a bit biased because my last name is Cook. Dad pointed out that the planet we were going to had already been discovered but that not a lot was known about it. Therefore, we wouldn't be discovering *Terra Nouvelle* but finding out more about it, just like Matthew Flinders had done circumnavigating Australia.

Dad was right about the arrival of our sleeping capsules. Men came into our house and took measurements and photos. As soon as my capsule was installed in my bedroom I was inside it having a good look around. That didn't take long. It was a bit like a drainpipe with a door at one end. I could see through it down one side until I pressed a button and made the glass opaque. It not only had a nice bed to lie on but a built-in sound system. Music played on it sounded awesome when you were inside and no one could complain if you were playing it a bit loud because the capsule was absolutely sound proof. You couldn't hear a thing outside it even if you put your ear up to its wall.

I couldn't wait to show all my friends, especially my best friend Borg, who I reckoned would be a bit jealous. I spent my first night inside my capsule sleeping like a baby. With the sound system off I could hear nothing at all except my own heart beating, when I listened carefully. There was no need for bed covers because the temperature was kept constant and I just lay on top of the bed. I set the alarm to music and woke up exactly at the right time the next morning. Over the next couple of weeks I think everyone in my school had come over to look at my capsule. I wasn't allowed to let people get inside it but ran through how everything worked and showed them the controls. For instance, it cleaned itself. Viruses, bacteria and dust were eliminated in the morning with the push of a button. It was very important that the spacecraft be kept spotlessly clean and dust-free. I bet you didn't know that most of the dust in your house is caused by your family and you shedding skin? My friends reckoned the best part was you didn't have to make your bed in the morning and I agreed.

Now Sue didn't like her capsule. It scared her. Girls, I don't know! She didn't even want to show it to her friends. She said they wouldn't be interested in seeing a prison. However, after a bit of coaxing from Mum and Dad, about a week later she was regularly going to sleep in her capsule as well. She agreed that it was good to go to sleep with nice music but most of all she felt safe from the boogie-men who lived under her old bed at night. I had pointed that out to her and I think it helped. Mum and Dad would have to wait to experience their capsule. They both said they didn't mind the wait.

We now only had two weeks to go, before we were to move out of our house and go on the 'trip of a lifetime', as Dad put it. The time had gone really quickly and luckily Mum had been doing most of the organising and packing. If it was up to me, I'd never be ready, that just wasn't my thing.

As the days passed I became very sad, not because I was leaving my friends and other family members, who seemed to be around at our house a lot, but I was feeling sad about leaving Timmy. Timmy is a little dog, a fox terrier, who belongs to Mrs. Bourke three houses up the road. Some afternoons after school, I'd play with Timmy in his back yard. I'd knock on Mrs. Bourke's door and ask if I could play with him.

Mrs. Bourke would always say, "He is in the yard just go through the side gate."

And I'd go around the side of the house and open the gate and Timmy would come running up to see me. We'd play ball in the yard and get tired. When he was

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tired he'd come and lean up against me as I sat on the ground. He'd pant a lot and look up into my eyes. He liked me playing with him because he really didn't have anyone else to play with. I loved playing with him as well. But don't tell anyone else about this, not my friends, and especially not my enemies, it would be too embarrassing. Just a joke! By the time you read this none of us will be around to tell anyone else about it. The problem with Timmy was I couldn't tell him what was going to happen, like I could my friends, because he wouldn't understand. He would never see me again and wonder why I didn't come up to play with him anymore. He might think I no longer liked him or that he had done something wrong. This is what was making me sad. Instead of twice a week I went up to Mrs. Bourke's every afternoon after school. Timmy was waiting for me at the gate and then one day, I didn't see him ever again. That is I don't think I did. This will become clearer later on in the book.

Chapter 2 The voyage begins

The taxi arrived out the front of our house to take us to the airport. Mum locked the door and walked into the front yard. She turned towards the house and stared at it for a minute. Dad had already put our suitcases into the boot of the taxi, helped by the taxi driver and was sitting in the front seat. After moving down to the road, Mum got into the back seat with Sue and me. I remember how strange it was that no one said anything on the way to the airport. It was a different story when we boarded the plane. It was as though everything changed at that point. Before, we belonged to the Earth and everything that went with it and now we had passed over to our new lives on the adventure we were about to start. We had been concentrating on the past and now it was time to look to the future. I looked out of the window of the aircraft and at the ground as we took off. Soon afterwards clouds blanketed everything from view. The world was gone and I fell asleep.

When I woke up we were coming in to land at Woomera where our shuttle would take us to the *Investigator*, which would be our home for a few years or even longer. Mum said there would be a surprise for Sue and me when we got on board. She wasn't going to tell us before time but thought it might make us feel better if we knew now. The surprise was that she had asked the tradesman who had installed our sleeping capsules at home to reproduce our new rooms on-board the *Investigator* so they looked exactly like the rooms in our house on Earth. I had wondered why the people fitting our capsules had taken so many measurements and now I knew. This was a wonderful thing for Sue because she liked her room and it would make her feel more comfortable, but it wasn't much of a surprise for me. I would have liked it to be different.

I would rather have a whole new modern cruiser spacecraft bedroom suited to me being on board the *Investigator*. If I was designing it I would have a large window looking out on space, so I could see the stars ahead of us with the Earth disappearing behind us. I knew a window was possible in the *Investigator* because they had used the latest technology in its construction, which included the newest, strongest, temperature resistant and clearest plaso-products available. Plaso-clear is clearer than the finest glass because it remains solid. Glass is really a liquid, that is why older windows have waves in them making it difficult to see things clearly through them. Have a look next time you are in an old house. Move your head up and down and see the waves in the glass.

Dad and I had discussed things about the cruiser and I had read as much as I could find on space travel over the last few weeks.

About an hour later Mum said to me. "You aren't happy at the thought of your bedroom being the same on the *Investigator* as it is at home are you?"

"It will be okay." I knew my parents were trying their very best.

"Dad thought you might like it to be a little different so they made a few modifications."

I smiled at Dad. I wondered what this meant. Anyway, I'd find out soon enough but it did make me feel a bit happier to know it wouldn't be exactly the same as my bedroom on Earth. How boring!

After landing at Woomera we were taken by land shuttle to our space shuttle. Woomera has now been used as one of Earth's dispatch points to space for almost 100 years. In fact the Russians conducted experiments there in the 21st century. There were a number of towers around, which were once used to test rockets in the 20th century. The towers were still being used today for more modern engine testing. The inside of the shuttle was a big disappointment. Although it had nice seats that we were being strapped into, everything else looked old and worn. Dad said we would only be spending a small amount of time in the shuttle so it didn't matter how it looked. He assured us that shuttles were still very functional and more importantly safe. There were other families coming on board and Dad shook hands with a couple of men he knew as they passed our seats.

I watched as kids looked around at the old fashioned interior. I think they were thinking what I had been thinking. When everyone was seated, a stewardess standing in the aisle told us what would happen on this first phase of our voyage. She said the take-off would be like an ordinary jet aircraft take-off except that we might experience a little rocking motion at low speed because the shuttle was really made for supersonic speeds. When the shuttle reached the required speed and altitude we would feel something like a gust of wind. This would mean the shuttle was adjusting to the correct cabin pressure for the trip into space. This would be followed by what passengers had described as a jolt and we would hear something like a gun going off at various intervals until we were propelled out of the Earth's gravitational force. I could see Sue looking a little worried. I thought how exciting this was going to be. We taxied out to the runway as an ordinary plane does and we waited at the threshold as an ordinary plane does. We were told the delay was due to military aircraft operating at low altitude. Then we lined up on the runway and took off just as an ordinary plane does. So far it wasn't spectacular at all.

The climb seemed to go on forever but eventually we were at our cruising level. I had time to call Borg at school. It was lunchtime for him and it was good to see him on the screen and I was able to point the camera around inside the shuttle and show him what it looked like. He was impressed, even though I hadn't been, and showed some of our other friends what was happening. He recorded it on his phone to show his parents when he got home from school.

A few minutes later the stewardess checked that everyone was buckled up and we were told to keep our hands down on the arms of our chairs and not to lift them up. Then a short time later I felt a strong gust of air around me, just as the stewardess had said would happen. In fact, it began to hurt my ears and eyes. This is something the stewardess hadn't mentioned. Without warning there was a severe bang and we were pushed back against our seats. Now this was more like it. I looked at Sue whose eyes were wide open. She looked really startled. I had trouble moving my head back to face front again because of the pressures exerted on me by the acceleration. I guess I too was looking startled. After two more bangs at shorter intervals we were able to relax a bit. There was no more pressure on my head or arms and I could lift my feet off the floor. The shuttle was floating or appeared to be.

Everyone remained strapped into their seats. Out of the small window all I could see was blue, a dark blue. I think all up it must have taken about an hour and we had docked with the *Investigator*. As we took our turn to move from the shuttle to the *Investigator* Dad said other families had taken a shuttle trip from other places in the

world and were already on the craft waiting for the rest of us to arrive. We were now orbiting the Earth attached to the cruiser. I was feeling a bit squeamish because we were weightless at this point and had to move carefully through to the airlock between spacecraft. We sat with other families for a few minutes while our weight adjusted and we became approximately the same weight we would have been on Earth. I don't pretend to know how this comes about but I do know it is very complicated. The *Investigator* has computers that sort out the air-pressure and the gravity fields to simulate that on Earth. As we sat there Mum was telling Dad that the main reason for going on the trip was that *Terra Nouvelle* was only half the size of Earth and this meant she would only weigh about 30kg there.

It took quite a time before we were moved through to the proper inside of the *Investigator*. There we waited at the side of a corridor. A tube arrived, a door opened and we got in. We sat down on a bench seat. We were with another family who had a girl a bit younger than Sue and she was crying quite loudly. The rest of the family was trying to settle her but not having much success. Her father shook Dad's hand and apologised for the noise the little girl was making but Dad just smiled. We smiled at each other. It was strange really because we hadn't had a chance to meet any of the people going on the voyage.

With a whooshing sound we were propelled along one corridor and then a few others until the tube stopped and the door of the tube opened.

The other father said, "This is where we get out." Dad again shook his hand and the family got out of the tube and went into a hallway.

Dad said to the father, "It looks like we will be neighbours," but the sliding door of the tube closed before the word neighbours could get out.

I could see the number 5 on the door of their new house. We again started to move, more slowly this time, until we stopped about 10 seconds later. I looked at Sue who was smiling up at Mum. It was good to see she wasn't being a cry-baby like the other girl.

The door of the tube opened and I could see 6 on our new front door. Dad was the first out followed by Mum and Sue. I was last to go into what looked exactly like the lounge room of our house on Earth. Everything was the same except the carpet wasn't quite as worn as the Earth one. Where the windows had been on our house there were screens. On these we could see the sort of thing we'd see from our earthly windows. The trees were there with branches gently swaying in the breeze and the sun was shining. It was as though we hadn't gone anywhere at all. We all stood looking a bit dumbfounded, even though we had been told this was how it would be. Sue ran to her room and I followed.

"Look Kaavan everything is the same in my room too. Hold on," she said looking behind the calendar. "There is a difference. There isn't a hole in the wall behind here that happened when I was putting up my calendar."

Mum told me later that people had taken photos of everything in our house and duplicated it for us here. Even the furniture was the same. Sue was so happy.

I wasn't in a hurry to see my room. Although I knew they would have made it different for me, I was sure it wouldn't be what I really wanted. Dad came into Sue's room and got me and we went to my room together. I couldn't believe it when he opened the door and said for me to go in. Apart from this room being neat and tidy, something my room hadn't been for the last 5 years, it was really amazing. I had a

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ceiling to floor window. It was huge. Looking out I could see the darkest blue sky I had ever seen.

I just said, "Buzzer."

"You know, most of the time you won't see anything out of the window. It will mostly be dark. And hopefully there won't be too many things going passed that we can bump into," Dad said.

I told him I didn't mind at all. I was out there just as I wanted. The room was painted a dark green colour and I had a wooden desk and chair and on the walls were charts from voyages by Captain Cook and Matthew Flinders and paintings of their ships. And next to Flinders' *Investigator* was a drawing of our *Investigator*. I couldn't have planned it better myself.

I turned around and saw Mum and Sue standing in the doorway. Mum was all smiles. I said for them to come in and have a look around.

Sue said, "No way, your room is spooky for me. I don't want to look outside up here." Mum also stayed outside in the hallway.

"I'll make everyone a drink and we better have something to eat as well. Come into the kitchen in about 15 minutes."

I thanked Dad and he said he was happy that I was happy.

Chapter 3 A real home away from home

The rest of the first day was spent getting used to our new surroundings. Even though the place looked the same, there were a few things to get used to. Most of the kitchen appliances were different from those at home and there were a lot more electronic devices to play with. I guess you couldn't call it a normal day because none of us went anywhere and it was strange to have Dad home the whole time.

The next morning we found that Mum and Dad hadn't slept very well. They had found it difficult in their combined sleeping capsule. Sue said they should have tried one out at home first like we did. Dad tended to agree.

Mum, looking tired made the comment, "I wouldn't have agreed to come if I'd known what it was like."

It seems that snoring is so much louder in a capsule. Dad was sure adjustments could be made and everything would be fine. Over breakfast he announced we would be meeting more of our neighbours that day. He said he was sure we would make new friends easily.

Here are just a few things about my Dad. Over the next few days I found out more about him than I had over the 12 years of my life. So many people liked him. I once overheard him say to Mum that he considered himself to be only average at his work, but that his real success was in the way he got on with people. I also found out that he was top of the list of people to come on this trip, not just because he was good with people but because he was very inventive. The people doing the selection for the voyage had said if something needed inventing to make life easier my Dad would be the one to do it. I didn't know he had invented so many things, mainly different processes at his work.

I and the rest of the world, only knew him as the inventor of the famous 'Band Aid' dispenser, which is found in nearly every house in the world and in more than one room. We even have one inside the boot of our car, attached to the side panel. 'What would life have been like before this invention?' the television advertisement says, while the ad. shows a lady in the kitchen of her house cutting her finger. She fumbles around trying to get a bandaid out of the packet and out of its protective covering. She is frantically trying to take the tabs off before she bleeds to death. All the time her finger throbs away. Then it shows the same lady cutting her finger and pulling a bandaid straight from the dispenser on the wall. She applies it to her injured finger in no time at all. It also shows how the dispenser is refilled with a new sealed unit that keeps its contents perfectly sterile, remaining that way until every bandaid in the packet is used. How clever is my Dad?

He is even cleverer than that. A few days after we boarded the *Investigator* he told me he had arranged some really important work for me to do. A maintenance team needed a 'young lad', as they put it, with exceptional reflexes. It seems that anyone over 25 years of age would be too slow to carry out this work safely. On hearing this Dad suggested me and because they expected me to be a 'chip off the old block' I would be perfect for the job. This was really good news because I'd be doing something really useful and getting paid as well. I would call Borg back on Earth sometime tonight. Soon it would not be possible to contact him.

As you know good times can't go on forever and after a couple of days Sue and I had to turn up for school. Even though we had seen a few kids around and talked to

them we hadn't really made any friends. There would be a number of classes on board with various ages in each, similar to the system on Earth. This meant that Sue and I could be in the same class and have the same teacher. We would still use the electronic teaching system, which means we mainly did our own thing, working through lessons with the teacher helping out if we had difficulties. The teacher would monitor our progress on his computer up the front of the class. This didn't mean we just kept to ourselves. We would all take turns up the front of class reciting or making speeches. To break the ice, our teacher had asked each class member to prepare a talk on any subject that interested them. I didn't need to prepare a talk I already had one ready. We listened to a 15 year old girl talk about her friends back on Earth and by the end of it everyone was feeling depressed, even the teacher had a tear in his eye.

Our teacher, Mr. Prentice, appeared to be a nice guy. He wore reading glasses and glanced over the top of them when addressing the class. He had a huge forehead made more prominent because he was starting to go bald and grey at the same time. He was a bit chubby, probably because he spent most of his day sitting in a chair. By the way, we always call teachers by their last name as a form of respect. Dad said in the past teachers had not been regarded as highly as they should have been by parents or students and this had led to a complete breakdown in the education system. I think this was in the late 21st century. Students were taken out of schools because of the dangers there and parents had to teach them at home. This went on for years until finally teachers no longer existed. Eventually, a group of parents got together and formed a class of their own, employing a former teacher. After this, schools began starting off once more. Parents made sure students and other parents gave teachers the proper respect. The system now works well. I only mention this in case you don't know what took place years ago.

As I was saying earlier, Mr. Prentice asked for someone to talk on a lighter subject so we all wouldn't feel too homesick after the girl's talk. I volunteered and got up in front of the class telling them about the study I had carried out on the humble snail. I started off by saying that animals are so diverse in their make-up and how little we really knew about any of them. For instance, scientists say that bees shouldn't be able to fly when you apply physics to them and dolphins move through water without appearing to exert much energy at all. I told them how a dolphin's skin gives off an oil, which makes it slip through the water. Then I moved to the humble snail, my favourite. I said that even though it has its house on its back, this is very light and round to give it good aerodynamics. The snail, also like the dolphin, gives off an oil so it can move along the ground smoothly. Its body is very sleek. It can even pull in its horns and eyes to form an even more aerodynamic shape. I then asked the class why, when the snail had all these amazing devices, allowing it to move really quickly, it had no interest in doing so, but just plodded along at a slow pace? Is it a low need achiever? This got a good laugh from everyone and I think it lightened up the mood for the rest of the day. Of course when we got home Mum asked how school went and like all kids we mumbled, "Okay, I guess."

Mum asked, "But did you learn anything?"

Sue replied, "Not really." I think it was then that Mum knew school would be okay for us.

The next day instead of doing regular work on our computers and reading from our electronic readers, Mr. Prentice decided to tell us more about the *Investigator*. By

this time we all wanted to know more. It had been difficult finding specific information on the *Investigator* while on Earth. This was for two reasons, one, because it was new and two, because some of the systems were top secret or classified or something. What I did know was how it looked on the outside. It resembles a huge building tipped onto its side. It was just a big rectangle really. It didn't need to be aerodynamic to move through space so it could be as chunky as it needed to be on the outside to maximise space on the inside. As I have said I have a drawing of our *Investigator* on my bedroom wall alongside Matthew Flinders' *Investigator*. They look so different from each other and yet they were made for doing pretty much the same thing – not surprisingly, investigating.

What Mr. Prentice told us next I had no idea about and the whole class listened intently. He said we would be aboard the *Investigator* for a number of years and because we couldn't just stop off at the supermarket for food on the way, we had to carry everything we needed for the trip there and back and the time in between. With 1500 people on board it would be impossible to stockpile enough food and water and everything else we needed for the voyage. And with the amount of waste we produced in this time it would pose a real health risk to everyone on board if we had to keep it until we returned to Earth. An international agreement now banned the dumping of waste in space. I remembered reading how the original *Investigator* had to frequently get to shore to replenish its supplies of wood, water and food. However, to overcome this problem our *Investigator* thankfully had what is called an 'Atom Meiser' on board.

Mr. Prentice continued to tell us about this amazing machine. An 'Atom Meiser' converts everything put into it back into its original components even if this means going back to individual atoms. Then it converts basic substances into anything we need, as long as it has the recipe for it in its database. This conversion applies to every kind of waste produced. In some circumstances its computers are clever enough to invent new substances. The oxygen we breathed, which our bodies convert into carbon dioxide would be converted back into oxygen for a new batch of air. Now this was something I hadn't even thought about. Firstly, I didn't know there were so many people on board and secondly, I thought we would have everything we needed aboard and dump our waste in space as we went along. This might surprise some readers but this has been happening for a long time now. We mainly rely on solar flares to come along and burn up any rubbish floating around in space.

The 'Atom Meiser' is definitely a remarkable invention because it means we won't be messing up space when we travel beyond the reach of our sun's solar flares. I was impressed but wasn't interested in how some of the processes worked. I'm not a good one for detail and fortunately Mr. Prentice wasn't either or maybe he knew the details but thought it better not to tell us at this point. As it was, this lesson led to some vivid imagining on the part of some boys at recess, who speculated on the generally disgusting areas of waste conversion.

It was at lunchtime that I met a couple of really nice guys. They were both from other countries, one was from England and the other from the USA. I asked them if they had a window in their bedroom and I could see their mouths drop. It seems there is a window in most 'houses', as we still called them, but no one had one in his bedroom. I invited them around to my place after school. I felt great about my window especially when they didn't have one, but thought better of carrying on about

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it. I didn't want to cause a problem or put them off being my friends. We could share my window that was better. School was looking up for me and because I didn't see Sue at lunchtime I think she must have made a friend too. It was good not having her so close and cramping my style.

Chapter 4 To Terra Nouvelle

We orbited the Earth getting use to our new environment. Finally the time arrived when the real voyage to Terra Nouvelle would commence. Everyone and everything was now on board and we were ready to go. Systems aboard the *Investigator* had been checked and re-checked.

Our start off day was a holiday from school and that was good news. It was a holiday because there would be some disruption to our usual day. The only people working on that day were those starting up the *Investigator* and getting it going on course. This would mean a bit of movement through the cruiser until it reached the cruising speed. We were told there might be some strange noises but for us not to worry. When you think about it, getting a high-rise building to move at almost the speed of light would probably mean some moving around.

Anyway, the good thing about it was the holiday. I woke up early and cleaned my room up a bit because my new friends, Keethe and Berte were coming over. We would spend the day together, mainly in my room, so we could look out the window. Till now, Dad had been right, I'd seen nothing but dark blue sky out of my window. Some other windows aboard the *Investigator* had a really nice view of the Earth with its blue and white marble patterns. My window faced a different direction, but the three of us were hoping that maybe the *Investigator* would turn so we could see the Earth before we headed out into space.

The guys showed up on time. They had to make sure before they left their houses that their rooms were in order with everything covered over with a special netting making sure nothing moved when the *Investigator* started off. I was doing the same to my room when they arrived. The guys had brought their computer games along and we decided to play 'air-battles' together. We selected the mode for three players which linked our 'GameCo' computers together and sat back in our chairs. This game is really good. We each fly a spacecraft and intercept one another on radar. If we are good enough we shoot the others down. I'm pretty good at it. I don't remember who won that day but I do know we played a lot of games before the announcement came over the speaker that we should clip our chairs to the floor and put more of the netting over ourselves. We were trying to do this (more like mucking around) when Dad came in to see what we were up to. What we were up to was tangling each other up in the net on the floor. Dad patiently helped us untangle ourselves and made sure we were secure before he went back to Mum and Sue in the lounge room. He gave the order for us not to move from our chairs until he came back in.

We were sitting there just looking out the window after Dad left us when Keethe announced he had to go to the toilet. In fact, when he said this, we all realised we needed to go. Then we quickly took turns helping each other on with the netting once more. I remember just staring out of the cruiser window at the deep blue of space when another announcement told us that all was in readiness to start the engines. This was followed soon after by vibrations. We were rocking a bit, almost floating, as if we were on a boat that had just been untied from a wharf. Then there was a jolt followed by a lot of rattles coming from my cupboards. I think we were moving but it was hard to tell. There were more jolts just like those we felt in the space shuttle. The guys were getting a bit fed up at looking out at the blue sky. Berte said he could have gone to another friend's house where they could see the Earth out their window.

“Then why didn’t you?” I replied but he didn’t answer.

I was a bit disappointed too, especially after a few more jolts and rattles because everything went quiet and we were still looking at dark blue nothing. Because it was so quiet and I was tied to my chair I sort of went into a trance. At first I thought I was imagining it but out of the corner of my window a lighter colour blue was appearing. And after a minute or so more light was coming through until the sky was half-bright and half-dark. We all sat quietly looking out and then suddenly we saw it. We saw the curved horizon of the Earth, out of the window, out of my very own window. I had never seen a greater sight than this. Before long the whole of my window was full of the Earth. Through the atmospheric haze we could see the marble shapes of clouds and oceans and the indistinct shapes of ground on Earth. And then suddenly we were looking down on Australia. It was not covered in cloud like the ocean was. It was as clear as clear to see. I couldn’t help myself but began raving on to Keethe and Berte about the different parts of Australia I could see. They didn’t seem to mind at all. They were sitting motionless. They were a captive audience in any case. As the whole Earth filled the window I pushed back on my chair. The Earth was so close I felt it would come straight through the window at us.

I looked across at the others and they were bushing back too. I relaxed a little while telling them more about Australia. Then we felt a swaying motion and the Earth moved up and down and then slowly disappeared. My window went back to its usual dark blue and that was the end of the show. An announcement from the speaker said we could now resume normal life for about one hour. After that we would have to be netted in again for some adjustments to telemetry. I love that sort of talk, don’t you?

“Want to play some more games?” I asked the guys.

They nodded and we got back to our ‘GameCos’. The odd thing was they didn’t make any comment about what they had seen, that is, until we all had lunch together with the rest of my family and Dad asked whether we could see anything. Then you couldn’t have shut them up – me either for that matter. Before leaving, Berte told me it was awesome what he had seen and Keethe later said he hadn’t doubted that we’d see the Earth out of my window and said how lucky I was. I told them both that it was our window not just mine. They liked that idea and I was so glad we had seen something, otherwise I don’t think my life would have been worth living. But most of all I thought it fantastic to see Australia so clearly out of all the parts on the Earth we could have seen. It was special.

Next day we were back at school and Dad was at work again, and so was Mum for that matter. Mum helped out with the small kids who didn’t have a mum or dad to look after them during the day. I received a message from one of the maintenance guys. He wanted to know if I could meet him after school to run through what my job entailed (remember the job Dad had got for me?). I called Mum on my mobile and told her I’d be a bit late. I was nervous about the job, mainly because Dad had said how important it was. However, I was also excited about it. Anyway, I met the man who would be my boss. His name was Peaterr and he had a big round open face with large blue eyes. He had short blonde hair and was starting to go bald on top. Even though he was in his thirties he said for me to call him by his first name. If an adult says you can, then it is okay to do that. He was a really nice guy and very relaxed about things. He laughed a lot and I don’t ever remember seeing him getting mad at anything or anybody. He really enjoyed life. This made me feel relaxed about my job

because I couldn't imagine him going crook at me if I did something wrong. He told me there was nothing to get stressed about and that it would be real fun. All the maintenance crew loved their work, he told me. With Peaterr as the boss I'm sure I would too.

Peaterr said we should have had a few practice runs before the *Investigator* started off but time had run out. But he said we could have a few dry runs over this week while the cruiser travelled at a steady initial speed of 40,000kph. We made times for these practices after school. He showed me over the *Limpet*, which was the name of the maintenance craft I would be working in. From the outside the *Limpet* looked like a water drop. It was metal on the bottom and plaso-tough on top. There were a few rows of seats in it. The front row had two seats. Peaterr would be in one and I would be in the other. He showed me over my console, which had a number of buttons and a screen. I told him it looked complicated.

"Ever play computer games?"

What a strange question to ask, "Of course I do."

Peaterr smiled, "Then it will be a breeze for you."

It was very exciting. I even got to sit inside and have a look around while he pointed out a few things to me and said not to worry if I didn't remember what he was saying because the next afternoon we would go through it again more thoroughly. I couldn't wait.

The next afternoon I even turned up early; that's how keen I was. There were about 10 people hanging around. One really big guy, who I wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley, asked me if I wanted something to eat or drink. He said he'd been told to look after me until Peaterr arrived. He was running a little late. If I ever needed to be looked after by someone, this guy would be the one I'd choose. He looked like he had been in lots of fights and even had part of his ear missing. I sat with other members of the crew at a table having toast and tea. The maintenance area looked like it was mostly a kitchen and one guy was making bacon and eggs that smelt really nice. They were cracking jokes and laughing loudly. I tried to hear what they were saying but couldn't make much of it out, which was probably a good thing. Peaterr came in about 10 minutes later. I had just finished eating and put down my cup of tea.

Seeing me he said, "Come on lad!" In general I don't like being called 'lad' but because it was Peaterr, it was okay.

We both sat inside the *Limpet* and Peaterr went through the different points on the touch screen. He would be driving the craft, which ran on rails attached to the outside of the *Investigator*. I would do the work of the engineer and check that all systems were operating. This wasn't the real reason for having me on board though. Later I would be responsible for keeping watch on maintenance crew who were walking in space. This was where quick reflexes would be needed. At this stage I was just so wrapped at having the part time engineer job. There was a permanent engineer but when I was needed there would be no room for him in the *Limpet* and that's why I had to learn his job as well. I would have to continue to keep my hours up to be able to operate safely. The *Limpet* could be used as a simulator as well as the real thing, so most of my time would be spent inside the *Limpet* inside the *Investigator*.

That afternoon while sitting in the *Limpet* Peaterr said, "Let's take it out for a spin."

He picked up a headset and put it on and pointed to another one for me to do the same. It was hanging over my console.

I heard him say, "Maintenance craft *Limpet* for outdoor exercise."

A moment later a voice came back, "Cleared to air-lock."

Peaterr threw a few switches and the console lit up and I could hear the sound of an electric motor. He moved the throttle forward and we began to move along a narrow rail that supported the *Limpet*. Ahead of us a door opened and we moved through and stopped. The door closed and Peaterr said for me to go through the menu on the screen and check that everything was operational. At this stage my stomach took on some butterflies. I knew so little about this job. But after touching the screen at each menu item and checking that the button lit up green I began to understand my job more clearly. What I didn't know was what to do if I got a red light. Anyway, none of those happened.

Over my headset I heard Peaterr say, "Limpet ready."

Back came the response, "Roger Limpet".

Then directly in front of us a door slid open slowly and above us we could see the outside. The sky looked its usual dark blue.

"Clear to proceed," the voice over the headset said.

Peaterr responded with, "Limpet".

Then moving the throttle forward Peaterr moved the craft along the rail. The nose of the *Limpet* suddenly pointed upwards and we climbed for a few metres until we were outside the cruiser and again became level. We were still on rails and would remain on them the whole time we were outside the cruiser. In the distance I could see the Earth. It was a fraction of its former self, seen by Keethe, Berte and me about 30 hours before. If my calculations were correct we would be something like 1.2 million kilometres away from it by now. I later thought it strange that I hadn't seen the moon when I was outside. Maybe it was around the other side of the Earth at the time or in front of it, so I missed it. It would have only been half its size seen from Earth. We slowly moved along the outside wall of the cruiser. This was awesome. We were like a beetle walking along a giant domino. I could see windows to the right and the left just below the *Limpet* and everywhere else was nothing but space. The rounded plasotough canopy gave us an uninterrupted 360-degree view of space, which was unlike my flat window, which just gave me the view directly in front. The *Investigator* appeared to be floating and not doing 40,000kph.

After moving in a straight line for about a minute we stopped and turned facing 180 degrees from our previous heading. I'm sure while sitting up front I should have been helping more, but instead I was doing a fair bit of day dreaming but that was all I was capable of doing this trip.

After another couple of minutes I heard Peaterr say, "Limpet 100 metres from air-lock."

Back came the reply, "Roger Limpet, cleared to enter."

In front of the *Limpet* a hatch was sliding open in the cruiser and not long afterwards we were moving down hill and back into the *Investigator*.

I remember Peaterr saying to me after stopping and the console going black.

"Well how was that?"

I replied, “Awesome.” Then sheepishly I said, “I should have been doing more things while we were outside, shouldn’t I? I was more like a passenger than the engineer?”

“That won’t happen again. You will have to do plenty of work next time. Everyone is struck the same way on their first trip outside.”

After school every day during that week we went outside, and I was becoming good at being the engineer. The following week we would not go outside unless real maintenance work was necessary because during that week the *Investigator* would be increasing speed. Even I knew that at 40,000kph we would not reach *Terra Nouvelle* in my lifetime. My brain could cope with the number 40,000 but when we had to get as close as possible to the speed of light we were looking at something like 300,000kps (that’s per second). This, in kilometres per hour, is around 18 million. How was this going to happen? No one before had gone anywhere near that fast and although not tested with the *Investigator*, scientists on board were confident we would be able to achieve around 17.5 million kilometres per hour. My teacher, Mr. Prentice, had sort of explained how this would happen but Peaterr did a better job. I sat in on a few talks he had with the other maintenance guys. By the way this little group was not the only maintenance team on board the *Investigator* there were at least another 10 teams stationed at different places throughout the cruiser. Peaterr explained that because we wouldn’t be going outside that week we would be employed in learning theory and doing simulator work.

How does the *Investigator* reach this incredible speed? You probably already now how this is done living in the 24th century but just in case you don’t I’ll try to explain it. I’m not as good at explanations as Peaterr but here goes. At the bow and stern of the *Investigator* are fins, that when deployed, fan out making something that looks like a satellite dish. They are made of ferro-alloy materials, which can either pick up heat or gravity fields from planets or stars way out in space. They then magnify this effect hundreds of times over. Peaterr said the fan on the stern would pick up heat from our Sun for a short while and convert it into energy and forward motion and the fan on the bow would pick the largest gravity field and focus it on the *Investigator*. The gravity field many times magnified would propel us towards that field and increase the *Investigator*’s speed. It would take at least a week to reach the target speed of 17.5 million kilometres per hour. At that speed it would take just over a year from now to reach our destination. When the speed is reached the fins would be folded back so the cruiser would again look like a domino rather than a wrapped sweet. After being outside I could picture this strange image and so could others in the maintenance crew who chuckled at Peaterr’s description.

Chapter 5 The ace *Limpet* engineer

“The employment of the dishes to increase speed went off without a hitch.” These were Peaterr’s words to his maintenance team at our next meeting.

During this week because we wouldn’t be going outside, I booked five sessions on the simulator. Not only did I practice the engineer tasks and ‘main-man spotting’ (from the longer version, ‘maintenance-man spotting’), which was the job I was really employed to do, I also mastered the art of driving the *Limpet*. This of course was on the simulator and not for real. However, it made Peaterr happy that I was becoming a help to the team and would be pulling my weight. Peaterr had been having meetings with other maintenance team leaders and while talking to one of them found that he was having trouble with his ‘main-man spotter’. Peaterr asked me if I knew someone at school who might be interested in taking on this job if it did come to replacing the guy they had. I said I knew someone who might be interested and gave him Keethe’s name and phone number. When I’d finished for the afternoon I gave Keethe a call and told him the story. He came over to my place after dinner and we talked about what the job was about. Like me he was a bit nervous about the whole thing but excited at the same time. I told him they might not even call him if things got sorted out on the other team.

The next morning at school Keethe told me he had dreamt about it over night and would be disappointed if they didn’t call him up and offer him the job. He didn’t have to wait long, because at lunchtime he received a phone call asking him to come over to the maintenance team after school. We shook hands. He said that getting the job would be easier than talking his mother around that he should take it. He knew she wouldn’t want him to be involved in anything dangerous. I told him to tell her how boring it would really be, which was probably true most of the time. Anyway, maintenance certainly sounds boring. He said he would also tell her how he would be earning his own money and showing responsibility, which would be a really good thing for him.

Keethe got the job, no worries! We had a lot more in common after that and compared how the different teams operated. It sounded like Keethe’s boss was not as easy going as Peaterr but he was okay to work with. There was a real difference between Keethe and Berte, apart from the obvious physical differences: Keethe was tall and thin with a shaved head and Berte was chubby with hair that brushed across his forehead, which he regularly flicked away from his eyes with his hand. The main difference was Keethe had ‘get up and go’ where Berte didn’t. I didn’t even think of giving Berte’s name to Peaterr because I knew it would create trouble. He would have worried about it and his parents would have worried as well about what it all meant. Whereas Keethe was like me and would do anything to make things happen.

Not a lot happened during the next week other than the *Investigator* taking almost twice as long to reach its final cruising speed of just below 17,000,000kph. At above this speed the cruiser started vibrating for some reason but on bringing the speed down a fraction it was smooth sailing, so to speak. The scientists were very happy about the situation because a few of them had thought the *Investigator* would have shaken itself to pieces reaching 10,000,000kph. However, these scientists were happy this didn’t happen and that everyone was still alive. I noticed it occurred a lot during the voyage, that even though everyone was positive before an event, afterwards they

were very relieved that things turned out. I guess it was because a lot of what was happening on this voyage had never been tested before. Being part of the maintenance crew I got to hear many stories but I don't think all of them were true.

We were now hurtling through space faster than anyone had been before but it didn't feel any different from going 40,000kph. The fore and aft fins had been folded back and the *Investigator* again looked like a domino. It was perfectly smooth on board. Unlike travelling on Earth where motors had to be used to keep a car or aircraft going, in space when a cruiser reached its cruising speed the power can be taken away and the craft will continue at the same speed. There is nothing outside the cruiser, like air, to slow her down. This was the theory anyway – no one really knew if the *Investigator* would hold its speed over time. If we hit something, well, that would stop her. I must admit I was a bit worried about hitting meteorites or whatever might be out in space.

According to Peaterr the theory was, and he pointed out that it was only a theory, anything in our path would be pushed away from us by a sort of bow wave reaching far out into space. This wave was formed by our speed. I couldn't understand how in a vacuum we could have a bow wave, so it didn't make sense to me. At the speed we were going we were unable to see what was in front of us. We couldn't use things like radar. We were going millions of kilometres per hour faster than radar and anything using light was only a bit faster than we were. I guess, there were many things we had to rely on the scientists being right about, but because some scientists did not agree with some of the predictions, it wasn't very comforting. But I was pretty lucky to have a Dad who was very positive about the situation and a boss that would laugh at anyone who said it couldn't be done. It is very difficult not to be more at ease with these kinds of people.

Each day that the *Investigator* increased its speed, the view out of my window changed. The faster we went the darker the space became, until at our present speed it was totally black. It was almost blacker than black if you can imagine that. It was not a black that you see at night on Earth that just says to you there isn't any light. This was an almost solid black that you felt you could touch, as though it had been painted onto the outside of my window, a black with substance. It took me a while to get used to it being in my room with me, before I could fall asleep at night. But after a while it became normal to me and became almost a blanket around my room. It was as if it was holding the *Investigator* in place rather than the earlier dark blue the *Investigator* was floating in. It is hard to describe to someone who hasn't experienced this, but it was as if we were now cutting through space and going at an active speed. The difference was something between rowing along on the sea in a small boat, where you rock along with the waves, and cutting through the waves in a large motor cruiser.

Maintenance teams carried out exercises outside the cruiser. This was something some scientists had difficulty with. Some thought that craft like the *Limpet* would immediately be sucked off the side of the cruiser because of its speed. This didn't happen. However, I wasn't in the first craft to test this out – anything that was a first was carried out by the regular maintenance crews. I thought this was fair enough and so did Mum and Dad. But it wasn't long before I had another trip outside. It was now eerie out there and it took a lot of getting used to. I remember the hatch sliding and our trip uphill onto the outside of the *Investigator* then seeing the black you could almost cut with a knife. Our lights were switched on and a strange thing happened.

The light lit up more behind us than it did in front of us. It was more concentrated at the front for a few metres and then it came back at an angle and lit up the *Limpet* and travelled back along way to our stern, fanning out as it went. This was very strange but normal for going at this speed. We stuck to the side of the cruiser. There wasn't a hint of being pulled away from it. However, because of the new light pattern the *Limpet* was of more use going in reverse if its front light was on. Fortunately, the builders of the maintenance crafts had placed bright lights on the rear of them as well. It was these lights we mainly used from now on while going forward. You know how I said the black was almost thick enough to see? Well, the light had the same effect. It looked like an oil painting that someone had covered in thick black paint and then put thick white paint over the top of it. You could see its texture.

We checked the exterior part of the *Investigator* that our team was responsible for and found it to be shipshape and I reported this to the control centre on the radio, which was really an intercom. We only had intercom aboard the *Investigator* now, any external communication no longer worked. I couldn't get in touch with my friends on Earth and I didn't know how long it would be before we could communicate with Earth again.

I won't bore you with everything that happened while we voyaged. I'll only mention that I was having trouble with my school work at this time. Mr. Prentice had contacted Mum and Dad about me being distracted and not doing as well as he thought I should be doing. The most interesting part of this was that Peaterr, my boss, was the most upset about it. He said my school work was the most important thing to me at this time and he was thinking of letting me go so I could concentrate more on what was really important. This hit me hard. He told me how he had wasted his time when he was at school and missed out on doing what he really wanted to do. He was happy now but it had been hard work for him to get the job he had. I promised him I would concentrate on school work and the next time I was graded I was up near the top of the class. Peaterr was pleased once more when this happened and he said it was a privilege to have me working on his team. Keethe, I found out was very clever. His grades actually went up when he joined his maintenance team. He was getting on really well.

After a couple of months in space the time finally arrived when my 'main-man spotting' expertise came into play. I can now tell you more about how it works. One morning I received a message in class to say that my team needed me. I was excused from classes and went straight to work. On arriving, people were putting on their space gear. I knew what was happening and got my gear and was putting it on when Peaterr began briefing us. On a routine inspection of the *Investigator* they had discovered one of the fins at the stern of the cruiser used to magnify the heat of the Sun and initially boost our speed, was not sitting correctly. It should have been completely covered by cowling but a piece of it was sticking out. This was the first time I had used my space suit. It was uncomfortable getting into the *Limpet* wearing all the gear and it seemed to take forever getting everyone on board. Instead of just Peaterr and me we had three others with us this time. We went through all the procedures and finally were outside and heading towards the stern of the cruiser.

Once at the very end of our rails the *Limpet* stopped and slowly the canopy of the maintenance craft opened. I made sure my seatbelt was fastened tightly as the three crewmembers stepped out onto the side of the cruiser and began to walk slowly to its

very end. We could see them clearly using the rear lights of the *Limpet*, which were trained over the maintenance craft and lit up much of the stern of the cruiser. Peaterr closed the canopy and we watched them walking along. They made positive steps as they walked. Each of them had a battery in their space suit that powered a magnetic field that held them to the cruiser. It was my job, should this fail, to press a button on my console sending a message to the cruiser's computers. This would concentrate a magnetic field on the point where the crewmember was touching and more or less pin him to the side of the craft until we could give assistance. If this wasn't done quickly he would disappear from the side of the *Investigator* and never be seen again. This was the theory anyway. This is where Keethe's and my training had been so important.

I intently watched the voltage gauges indicating how their batteries were going. Everything was normal. They were now at the very end of the *Investigator* and would disappear from our sight. I saw them turn on their lights, which were attached to the back of their helmets. This adjustment had been made after finding out how light worked outside the cruiser. Their lights lit up their helmets and then radiated in an arc from the front of them. They disappeared from sight. I had my finger ready in case the voltage should change. There were three gauges I was concentrating on. It seemed like they were out there for an hour, but it was really only about a quarter of that time when Peaterr said they were back. Once they were inside the *Limpet* I could relax. They were back safely and from their accounts the fin had been put back in place. After the operation was over Peaterr congratulated the team on a job well done. We had been the first team to be used to remedy a situation. Up until now all teams had just been training for the time they would be needed. I thought about how some people back on Earth, like airport firefighters, rarely use their training in real situations. Some of them never get to put out a proper fire, but all the same, they need to be prepared if one should happen.

A few scientists were pushing to have the front fins deployed again to see if we could now get more speed out of the *Investigator*, but the captain declined to do it. It was about two months away from a change in direction for the cruiser and at that time they might try to get more speed. But at the moment it wasn't worth the risk. In his opinion, you don't fix something that isn't broken. The maintenance teams agreed with that. I haven't spoken about the captain before, that's because during the whole voyage I never actually saw him and he was hardly ever talked about. I don't think I even knew anyone who had seen him. Everyone thought it was a good sign not to hear from him because it meant everything was running smoothly, and it was.

Chapter 6 A lot more than just morning sickness

We had now been voyaging in space for 6 months and over the last month people were starting to get sick. This was something that happened in the morning mostly. An increasing number of people were finding it difficult to get up out of bed and do a full day's work. Most picked up after lunchtime but until then they were not much use at all. That is why it was called morning sickness and not for the other reason. This didn't affect anyone in my family, which was good. However, my family was starting to get sick of the pretend windows we had in our house. Occasionally the screens would show a rainy day but they were obviously fake and most of the time we kept the curtains closed and the lights on. Of course we needed the lights on all the time wherever we were aboard the *Investigator*. I had two lights in my bedroom. I needed them because I had extra dark in my room because of my window.

Just because none of my family got morning sickness didn't mean we all stayed healthy. While the epidemic was in full swing Mum became very sick, very quickly from something else. The doctors on board had been busy with everyone else but our specific doctor carried out a number of tests. She was weak and getting worse each day, so we were worried about her. Tests found she had pancreatitis. This was a life threatening illness even for today's medicine. Mum was given a medical procedure that stimulated healthy pancreatic cells in her body to grow another pancreas alongside the damaged one. After about a week Mum was so weak she was in bed all the time. We had to look after her, and each other, during this time. After about a week the doctors found out the cells for her new pancreas were not growing and this was really bad news. She had more procedures and was given lots of drugs. Dad was off work to look after Mum and I was off maintenance team work but Sue and I still went to school each day. We all helped out at home. I was really scared that Mum would die.

Doctors took some of Mum's pancreas cells and started to grow them outside her body and this worked well. Then they put them back into her through a blood vessel and we hoped that this time they would grow. I found out how the procedure worked by looking it up on my computer. You know back in the distant past they actually used to open a person up and do things inside them and close them up afterwards. Can you imagine having your insides out on the operating table while doctors played with them? No wonder so many people died back then. No one would think of doing that to a person today.

The doctors told Dad this was Mum's last chance because if it didn't work she would be too weak for them to try it another time. We waited and we prayed. I guess she only had a few days to live by that stage. Then miraculously Mum's colour changed and she began to grow stronger. She was getting better. A few weeks later and she was perfectly well again. She went back to the doctor who prescribed her a drug that would get her body to eat away her diseased pancreas. He said that her new one was doing just fine. We were very thankful for her recovery. Apart from this we all remained healthy except for the odd cold. These were treated using a chemical that destroyed the virus within a couple of hours and stimulated red cell production. You started to feel better straight away.

The morning sickness still had the experts puzzled though. What was causing it? Scientists were in their element aboard the *Investigator*. They had a perfect

environment in which to study it. No one could have come in or gone out so no one had brought it onto the cruiser like a virus or disease. They went to work using their computers. I took a keen interest in what was happening because both Keethe and Berte had fallen sick along with their families. Now I knew Keethe wasn't faking it because he wouldn't miss his maintenance work. I wasn't so sure about Berte. I don't know why. Anyway, the scientists first looked to see if it was a certain area of the cruiser that had the illness but they found it scattered throughout the craft. What they did find out was that if one family member had it other family members got sick as well. If no one else in your family had it then you probably wouldn't get it. That's why my family was okay. With Keethe and Berte off school and only doing a little bit on their computers at home I managed to get almost a month ahead of them in school work. This was great. I was usually at about the same stage as Berte but Keethe was always a week ahead.

The most important discovery made was the fact that all the people who were sick came from the northern hemisphere. This was the first exciting discovery by the scientists. Now they had to come up with a reason why this was important. The computers went to work looking at the differences between southern and northern-hemisphere people. I thought it was obvious. People in Australia were healthier than those anywhere else in the world. It is the best place in the world to live. This is a joke I am making of course, but I do think there is some truth in it.

Remember how my family was getting sick of the same old fake weather through our windows and decided not to look at them any more? Well, there was a link here to the illness. It looked as though a proper change in season was important to people. I knew it took a long time for all of us aboard to settle into a day and night pattern when there wasn't really a day or night.

The northern-hemisphere people had just come out of winter when they joined the *Investigator*. The southern-hemisphere people had finished enjoying a lovely warm summer when they came on board. We in Australia would have just gone through winter now and hadn't experienced any adverse effects from not being cold. The scientists felt that the northern-hemisphere people were in need of sunshine. So pretend Suns were set up around the place where they could sit for a while and experience all the wave forms generated by our Sun. There were even some ultra violet lights. Before long, people began to pick up and become more active. This was excellent news for all, especially the southern-hemisphere workers who had had to take up much of the northern-hemisphere peoples' work. Things got back to normal in about a week. We southern-hemisphere people were also sneaking into the 'sunrooms', as they were called, to get a touch of sunshine. The sunrooms remained permanent areas because southern-hemisphere people would need their effects before long with the next change of season.

Except for a few minor maintenance fixes, mostly happening in other maintenance team areas, everything was running smoothly. Then one night while in my room, just before getting into my sleeping capsule, I heard a startling noise, like the sound of a bullet being fired from a gun. It happened just outside my window. With it I saw a flash of white light. I got up from my chair and reported it on my mobile to the maintenance area, then, I went and woke up Mum and Dad and told them. Dad got up and came into my room and we looked outside for a long time but saw nothing. While we were watching I received a call on my mobile. By the way, all

mobiles were connected to the intercom system of the *Investigator*. This call was from a maintenance person who was just outside our door. Dad let him in while I kept watch outside. I told him what I had seen and heard and he wrote the details down. I think both he and Dad thought I had dreamt it and maybe I had, but the man said I had done the right thing to report it. Nothing happened the next day. But for some reason the day after about six people interviewed me, wanting to know the ins and outs of what I had seen. I asked them why they were so concerned about this now when earlier no one had been interested. They said a team of people had been put together to look into it. One man told me they hadn't been interested until they had interviewed maintenance crews about it. Peaterr had told them that if I had seen and heard things, then they had definitely happened.

I wondered if the incident would have been believed more quickly if an older person had reported it. Sometimes, people are slower to believe a younger person. As it happened, the area outside my window was the responsibility of Keethe's maintenance team. He had been called out of class to go with his team and scan the side of the cruiser. I couldn't wait to get home and see what was happening. When I got there both Mum and Sue were in my room watching three space-suited maintenance people walking around outside the window. They could only really see them when they walked across the plastic window or leaned in that direction. Neither of them had seen people dressed that way before, except in photographs. When I got to my room Sue asked me all sorts of questions. She was very impressed when I told her I sometimes wore a suit like those guys.

Not long after the people disappeared from around my window. Keethe called to say they had found a scrape on the metal a metre away from my window. As I was talking to him I could see the familiar white light from the helmets of a maintenance crew outside. I couldn't actually see people, just lights shooting off at different angles. Keethe said another team was doing repairs to the cruiser so they could gain experience in this type of work. He also said that the damage, although only minor when they found it, could have become worse and even dangerous if it hadn't been fixed up straight away. There was a good chance that a large amount of outside skin would have torn away from the cruiser over time. Apart from the actual physical damage, those monitoring the *Investigators'* progress had noticed slight changes to its course. It was only a fraction of a degree but worth noting. We were coming up for a course change soon so it wasn't of great concern; it would only mean a slight adjustment to the heading. The big question for me was what had caused the damage? What had hit the side of the cruiser? I was hoping the scientists were right about meteorites, but I still felt we were in danger. All maintenance crews were needed next morning and every inch of the cruiser's outside skin was being looked at.

My job was now very important. I was not only looking at the battery readings for our three crewmembers outside but also monitoring the others in my area. My finger could no longer just hover over three gauges because at times there were 15 gauges indicating charge on my screen that I had to keep my eyes on. Suddenly out of the corner of my eye I saw a drop in current of about a volt. My reflexes immediately took over. It was a fraction of a second and my button finger had flattened a poor guy. I knew he would have been squashed against the cruiser wall. I had a red light on my console showing the 'main-man' belonged to another maintenance crew. I continued to monitor. I felt a space-suited hand touch my shoulder. I half smiled but didn't lift

my eyes from the console. I knew that the other crew would be hearing an alarm and their maintenance craft heading towards the poor guy on the ground (so to speak). His remaining outside crew would be heading to the pick up point, and their part in the exercise would be finished. We had almost finished our shift too and hadn't found anything. Most people wondered what we were looking for. Wouldn't whatever had hit the side of the *Investigator* be millions of kilometres away by now? We gathered our crew but Peaterr said he wanted to have one final look around. He radioed that we were moving to another maintenance area. This was Keethe's area, but his crew had already left the outside.

Given permission, we moved along a number of tracks and then turned towards the stern of the *Investigator*. The three outside crewmembers got out of the *Limpet* and began looking around. Peaterr told them to look in the air and not on the ground. I could see lights going in all directions as the helmets of the crew turned with the movement of their heads. They were outside for about three minutes before they returned to the craft and Peaterr opened the canopy. No one said anything until we were back inside the *Investigator*.

Then Peaterr asked, "What did you find boys?"

And one of the crew handed him a nut. It was only small, about a centimetre across.

"I'll report it, and well done, all of you."

I must admit I didn't know what was going on and after we had secured everything Peaterr held a team meeting. There were a number of us in the dark, I think. That is, I didn't want to think I was the only one that didn't have a clue what was going on. Peaterr explained to everyone that it had been a nut coming loose from somewhere on board the *Investigator* that had made the damage to the outer skin close to my window. It had not been a meteorite, which was great news to everyone's ears. Where the nut had come from and whether the bolt it had come from would also come loose and do even more damage was for another crew to look into. It had not happened in our appointed maintenance area, nor from the angle of incidence had the nut come from our area either.

Peaterr had cleverly worked out that the object, whatever it might be, would not remain on the side of the cruiser but project off and be held in the air by forces we knew little about, travelling near the speed of light. He deduced this by watching the lights of the crew walking around. He had worked out that light, apart from moving backwards along the cruiser was only effective to the end of the cruiser. Light was very limited at the bow and would only penetrate the darkness to a height of eight feet at the stern. And it did not travel further than the cruiser itself. To see around the stern of the cruiser the crew had to be on the very back of it. Peaterr had thought that if light wouldn't go beyond the stern, then maybe a solid object wouldn't either and he had been right. The crewmember was able to reach the nut and pluck it out of the air.

Peaterr's next announcement was a bit embarrassing for me. He told everyone that I had saved the life of one of the other maintenance team members by hitting the low battery button before anyone else had been able to. They gave me a round of applause and it made me feel good, but really I had only been doing my job. Peaterr said later I shouldn't be embarrassed and that I should get the credit for what I had done. He also said it was my character and my attitude towards work that made him proud to have me on his team.

The other team, really responsible for the guy, later denied that I had any part in saving their team member's life. For a long time they said it was their 'main-man spotter' who had pressed the button. Our team wasn't drawn into the argument but we all knew better than that. I was very happy for the support I got from my team and that was the main thing. The only time I ever thought about this incident was when someone else brought up the topic and I always told people to drop it. It really wasn't that important to me. I told my family about everything that had happened that day and they were amazed by the whole thing. About a week later Dad came home and said it had been my finger on the button. Computer records for that day confirmed my story. He said he was very proud of me because I hadn't made a fuss of it after the other crew had bad-mouthed me. He said, sometimes we have to be content just to know the truth, even if others didn't want to believe it. I understood what he meant after thinking about it for a while. But it was good to know my family and friends knew the truth.

By the way, Keethe's maintenance crew the next day put the nut back where it belonged, on the cowling of the front fins. While his maintenance crew was up at the bow of the cruiser they noticed they were being affected by a kind of breeze. Maybe the flat bow cutting through space did produce waves of some type. After the incident there was a lot of speculation about space and the speed of light and its effects. Some of the scientists said that if the *Investigator* had been going faster than it was, the maintenance crews would not have been able to go outside, because the smaller bow wave would have ripped anything off the side of the cruiser. Others said that the bow wave would have been bigger and maintenance crews would have been able to go outside but they wouldn't have found the nut. What really amazed me was how the nut after hitting the side of the *Investigator* was suspended in space. Our tallest maintenance-crew member had to really reach up high to get it.

Now some people were saying my job was no longer necessary because if anyone came off the side of the cruiser they too would be suspended in the air at the stern of the cruiser to be plucked down like the nut. The funny thing was no one was willing to test this theory so my job wasn't in jeopardy just yet.

Chapter 7 Are we there yet?

You know what I think? I think everyone is a scientist. You don't need a degree in science or study things for years and years. If you make a discovery, which is really just finding something out and being able to explain it, then you're a scientist.

Over the next few weeks Dad was not his usual self. He was working hard and was distant when anyone at home tried to talk to him. Something was worrying him and I don't think it was us at home, but I didn't say anything to anyone about it. A little while later I got the impression that not everything was going well for Peaterr either, because at work he was in the same kind of mode as my Dad. Nothing seemed to be important to either of them. They were in a different world (so to speak). If you mentioned something that would normally get a response, all you got was a shrug of the shoulders. I came to the conclusion that if none of the little things mattered, then there was something really big going on that most of us on the *Investigator* knew nothing about. I wanted to know what it was.

At lunchtime one day I left the class and went to see my Dad in his office. When I got there his secretary said he was in a meeting. I wandered over to the meeting rooms and through the glass of one of them I could see people arguing. Have you ever seen people arguing and not been able to hear what they are saying? Well, it looks like this. There is usually one person red in the face standing up and waving his arms around. Then there are others sitting down leaning forward in their chairs and when there is a break in the words coming from the one standing up, someone sitting down goes red in the face and waves his arms around. This is usually followed by the one standing, speaking again and some of those sitting down crossing their arm, and sitting back in their chairs. I watched this for a few minutes. I could see Dad sitting with his arms crossed and leaning back in his chair. He wasn't even watching what was going on but staring at the wall. I turned around and went back to class. Mr. Prentice wanted to know where I had been because we weren't allowed to leave the class even at lunchtime. I told him something important was happening and that I had gone to see my Dad about it. He said for me to get permission from him next time and I apologised.

That night Dad came home late, but I had to talk to him. I got up out of my capsule and went into the lounge room. Mum was already in bed. Dad was sitting there having a coffee. I just asked him straight out what was going on. He said there was nothing going on and not to worry and smiled at me. Have you ever experienced that? Someone not prepared to talk to you and smiling? It's annoying and I said something I had never said to Dad before.

"That is not true."

He looked at me sternly and I stared back at him.

"Okay, there is a problem and everyone will find out about it soon enough."

So I asked, "Can't you tell me?"

He replied, "I'm not supposed to."

And it looked like he was just about to open up to me.

But again smiling said, "It is just a bit of a hiccup and nothing to really worry about. It will take some thinking to nut it out, that's all."

So I went back to my capsule, none the wiser. People 'in the know' lightened up over the next week and so did I.

Work had been a bit slack lately. Peaterr hadn't called me in for a while now and my school work was going along well. I was called to a meeting with the maintenance team one afternoon and an announcement was made that the *Investigator* would be slowed down considerably so the captain could take some bearings and realign the cruiser in the direction of *Terra Nouvelle*. After that we would put on speed so that we could reach the planet in a couple of months' time. Peaterr said that at low speed we would be spending some time going over every square inch of the cruiser. It looked like some cracks had appeared in the outer shell. I asked if this was what had been worrying people. He said he didn't know what I was talking about. The cracks were not a problem but they needed to be repaired. The *Investigator* had two layers of metal. The outer layer was what they called a sacrifice skin. This could be harmed without any effect on the cruiser itself. So the problem was something else.

Over the next week we slowed and all maintenance teams were put to work. We were almost floating again in dark blue almost black sky with stars all around us much brighter than anyone has seen on Earth. They were bright because there was no other light around the cruiser to dull them. When outside I had time to look out at space, even while scanning the battery indicators.

One night after a maintenance patrol I lay in my capsule looking into space at the sparkling stars when it hit me. If we were only two months away from *Terra Nouvelle* shouldn't we be able to see its sun clearly from here? Of course all stars are suns but every one of them seemed a long way off. What did this mean? I asked Keethe if he had seen one of the stars much brighter than any of the others? He couldn't say he had. I asked the same question of every maintenance team 'main-man spotter' and got the same answer. I went to Dad in his office after school. He said he was busy, something he would never have said before this secret he was keeping. He had always been available to talk to. He said he would talk about whatever was bothering me at home.

At home I talked with him and he just said we had over two months to travel and at almost the speed of light this would make an incredible difference in getting to where it was we were going. He said there really wasn't anything to worry about and they were in the middle of making calculations on the heading to take. He told me the cruiser had been slowing down over time which meant it might take three to four months to get there now but no one was in a hurry, were they? He asked me how my book was going and I told him I had plenty of notes. He said he was proud of me because my maintenance and school work were going so well.

Next day, by coincidence, Mr. Prentice also asked me how my book was going. I showed him all my notes and he said I should quickly put them into book form so they could be sent back to Earth. It would now take almost nine months for my book to get back to Earth. I said it was not even close to being finished but he said I had more than enough notes to finish the first book off. The first book could be the travelling out book, which could be followed up by a second and even a third. So at night for the next week I was flat out getting all my notes in the right order and trying to link them together into a book. This is what you have been reading up till now and as you can see I have at least finished this part of it.

If your book doesn't stop here and you have more to read then you must have a more recent version of my book. I decided not to split it into different books but to add as much to it as I could as the voyage went on. It did make me feel good getting the first part away just in case there wasn't any more to come. But my story is far from finished. It is really just starting. With school, maintenance work and writing the book I was exhausted by the end of the week.

During the following week the *Investigator* again began to pick up speed. This time it only had the front fins out and we were concentrating on the gravity from the sun that owned the planet *Terra Nouvelle*. We had a rest from maintenance work and one night I sat and read through the first part of my book to myself. I found some mistakes in it but it was too late to change them now, it had already been sent off. I put this out of my mind because I had to concentrate on what was happening next and put down some more words.

Peaterr said at the next maintenance team meeting that the *Investigator* was back to speed. This had happened really quickly. In my room the stars had disappeared once more and the thick solid black outside had returned. I had time to think again. Worrying thoughts ran through my mind, things that I had seen and heard. Why had the *Investigator* slowed over time? Once at a speed in space it should have remained at that speed unless something slowed it down. Why did we have what seemed like a bow wave when there was meant to be nothing in space to cause it? I sat up. What made the nut come off the front fin and fly past my window and then stop eight feet in the air, where it could be plucked down by our maintenance crew? And why were we not closer to the planet *Terra Nouvelle*? Usually I like to solve problems but these were not only harder than usual but scared me a bit as well.

Were these things frightening Dad and Peaterr too? Surely they knew the answers? They were supposed to be in the know. Next morning before he went to work I asked Dad if I could make an appointment to see him. He looked at me strangely and said I would never need to make an appointment to see him. I told him how hard it had been to talk to him lately, to which he said he was sorry. He had been busy but he would find the time to talk to me. He asked me what I wanted to talk to him about and I said it was to do with part two of my book. He said when he got home I could have as much time with him as I liked.

That night he came into my bedroom and sat down. I put my questions to him. He told me there were many things that were happening on this voyage that had never been experienced before, but that I should not worry about anything because it was working out. The *Investigator* had slowed because it appeared that the closer you go to the speed of light a resistance is set up. He said for me to think about it like going through the sound barrier. Some how the nut that came off was propelled by this force, and it had stopped due to the pressure exerted by the speed of the cruiser. It hadn't been able to break through something like surface tension. He said the *Investigator* was making good speed – almost the speed of light – this time. They had pinpointed *Terra Nouvelle*'s sun and focussed on its gravitational force. He said that could only mean we were closer to our new planet than I thought, even if I hadn't been able to see its sun more brightly in the sky earlier. I was not to worry about anything. What Dad had told me made sense and it did make me feel better. What worried me was that everyone I spoke to was saying not to worry. That in itself was a worry. Mr. Prentice said I had an overactive imagination.

Chapter 8 The announcement

For a week nothing out of the ordinary happened, except that Dad was always at meetings until late at night. Then a very remarkable thing happened. I woke up one morning to find the sky thick with red, a bright blood red colour. Apart from nearly making me sick, I wondered what it meant. I got out of my capsule and was going to wake Dad up to tell him but I found him already up and in the kitchen. I babbled on to him about what I was now seeing out of my window and all the time he sat there without any hint of surprise. I thought he would at least say I was seeing things and we'd go and check my story out.

But he just nodded his head. "I know, Kaavan," and for the first time in a while he smiled properly. It wasn't a fake smile, trying to make me feel good, but a smile that had relief in it.

"They are going to make an announcement this morning about the whole thing. You can have the morning off school too," he said.

"Can you tell me now?" I asked him.

He said he could tell me what the announcement was about but not the actual announcement. Dad was still guarded in his answers to me and I didn't like that.

The short answer to why the sky was now red was that we were travelling faster than the speed of light. We had broken the 'light barrier', so to speak. The red colour was the first split in the spectrum, you know how it goes – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. We were now splitting the spectrum into its first part, which was red. I asked Dad how fast we were going and he said he couldn't answer that yet. According to some of the scientists on board we were going almost twice the speed of light, but so far the computers had not been able to calculate it. He also said we were now outside the known laws of physics and a lot of what was happening had been conjecture. I think that meant making it up as we go along.

Only some of the scientists on board had been able to come up with what would happen if we could actually break through the speed of light and had got the colour right. Some scientists and lots of other people on board the *Investigator* thought that the cruiser would break up at that speed. I asked Dad why we had to go so fast if we weren't meant to be far away from the planet now? He shrugged his shoulders.

I asked him, "Are the top people going to let everyone on board know what is happening? There are a lot of things people are uncomfortable with at the moment. If I could work out something was wrong others would have too."

He said, "Hey, I think you are right. But I don't think the scientists have all the answers yet. Let's be pleased we are still here after going through the 'light barrier', okay?"

I nodded my head.

The whole family was having a leisurely breakfast when the announcement was made over the intercom. The official message was that the *Investigator* had slowed over time, which meant taking the unprecedented step of exceeding the 'light barrier' to make up for lost time. We were told we were crossing new ground that no one outside those aboard the *Investigator* had experienced before. Some people had felt a slight vibration in the middle of the night. However, nothing out of the ordinary was expected to happen. We would now be back on schedule in a short space of time. I thought, what is normal aboard the *Investigator*? But nothing bad had happened so

everything was okay. The announcement also said that the morning would be free for everyone not actively involved in the workings of the cruiser and that when people had the time they might like to see the magnificent colour of space. He finished the announcement by saying this colour might change over time but not to be alarmed, it was normal.

Normal was not one of my favourite words right now. There was still something happening that I didn't know about and I planned to find out what it was. After school I went to a maintenance meeting. We were only having the occasional simulator exercise and meetings. No one was prepared to go outside now that we were going faster than the speed of light. In private I asked Peaterr whether he knew that the *Investigator* was going to go through the 'light barrier' and he said he did but was not allowed to tell anyone. He had only been told in case something had happened and the maintenance team needed to do something to help. I asked him whether he knew anything more than me

He answered, "I know a lot more than you, lad. I've been around longer than you."

Then he smiled. It was good to see he was more relaxed or relieved like Dad was.

After a couple of days I woke to an orange sky, then the next day there was yellow outside. I asked Dad what this meant and he said the scientist thought we were going from between 4 and 16 speeds of light. He explained that as red sky was between 1 and 2 times the speed of light, orange sky was between 2 and 4, yellow between 4 and 16, green between 16 and 256, blue between 256 and 65536 and indigo between 65536 and. . . . Dad didn't have an end number for that one even though there was still violet to go. I guess the big discoveries here were that speeds of light were not measured linearly and that less energy was needed to go through the different phases than to get up to the initial speed of light in the first place.

Over the next two days we progressed through green to blue, so we were now doing anything between 256 and 65536 times the speed of light. This colour held for two months and during this time I concentrated on my school work and estimating how far we had travelled, both with great difficulty. According to Peaterr we had reached top speed for the gravity field of the star we had attached to. One afternoon we waited ready to take the *Limpet* out if we were needed. They were folding up the forward fins once more because they could no longer increase our speed. Fortunately, everything went well and we weren't needed. No one had any idea whether we would actually survive going outside at the speed we were going. Peaterr said he heard from someone that we were travelling in the vicinity of 1,000 speeds of light.

Later I worked out that over one year we would have travelled at least 167 light years from Earth. Lucky I had sent off my manuscript earlier because now it would take 167 years to get there and the time capsule would have already been opened without my book being inside it. Communication with Earth was now out of the question as far as we knew, although we were still sending messages as a trial. I wrote to Borg a couple of times and then forgot about it. I was sure he would not receive them, not in my lifetime anyway.

After travelling in the thick blue for two months, there was another announcement made to everyone on a Monday morning. (We still used the days of the week and months of the year used on Earth.) A year had now passed since we left our house back in Australia and I was one year older. The announcement stated that the

Investigator would be slowing because we were coming up to *Terra Nouvelle*. And as promised it had taken just over one year to reach this destination. But by my calculations we were at least 166 light years beyond that planet by now if it was meant to be one light year away from Earth.

As you can imagine as soon as Dad got home I picked his brains. He said he had not known where *Terra Nouvelle* was before we left Earth, but he knew a lot more than he did then. He said he would have studied more on the subject but had been really flat out at work before we headed off on this voyage. I asked him if he knew then, what he knew now, would he have volunteered us to go? He said, "No." I was thinking I should have found out more about our galaxy as well. If I had looked up about stars I would have found that the nearest was around 4.22 light-years away. And that was Proxima Centauri in the Alpha Centauri group. I would also have been uncomfortable knowing that just past Pluto was the Kuiper belt with tens of thousands of asteroids in it. So really we were living a lie when we thought we were travelling to a planet only one light year from Earth. Some people on board had known about this and hadn't set anyone straight.

It was now too late to put this in the first part of my book. I did some more study for myself. There was Barnard's Star 6 light years from Earth, Wolf 359 about 7.8 light years from Earth and some weird ones like BD+36 degree 2147 about 8.2 light years away. There were a lot of suns not named that just had numbers after GJ or HD. By my calculations we were probably in the constellation Pegasus about 150 light years away from Earth. But this was only a theory because I didn't really know. I just hoped the scientists had chosen a nice planet like Earth to visit whichever star or sun it was attached to. There were rumours that it was HD209458 but what did that mean to anyone?

What I had learned was the whole voyage had relied on things that were not known before we left and had never been tested, little things like whether the *Investigator* could go through the 'light barrier'. I asked Dad whether he knew of any other surprises? He said he did but they were of little account compared with what had gone before. He promised me after exceeding the 'light barrier' all other things paled into insignificance. I wasn't so sure. I think it is bad when people can't be honest with each other about things.

Chapter 9 But does it look like home to you?

Rumours began to circulate around the cruiser that no one really knew where we were going. I think these rumours were true. We were called again to man the *Limpet* just in case, while the stern fins were deployed. But again we weren't needed because everything went well and we returned to our homes. Over the next few days we moved back through green, yellow, orange and red to the more familiar black. And after a few more days we were coasting along in the dark blue with stars visible in the sky. The stern fins were folded back once again into their housing. From my window I could only see very distant stars. I went to other parts of the *Investigator* but couldn't really pick the star or sun that we had been aiming for with its planet like Earth. There were now a couple of stars bigger than I had seen the last time we stopped but these could still be light years away. However, this time we all knew that the *Investigator* could get around space in pretty quick time so this was no longer a problem. We would be at this slow speed for a week giving the maintenance crews time to check the exterior of the cruiser. But I had the feeling it was more to give the scientists time to work out which way to go next. You may have noticed that I have become sceptical.

As the top team still, Peaterr led us out before any of the others. As we drove up the incline to the outside we weren't prepared to see what we actually saw. It looked like every bit of metal on the cruiser had rusted. Every square inch of it had that dull brown colour. Three of the 'main-men' walked across the crusty exterior. They cut a piece of the outside skin away and repaired the area with new metal. When back inside the *Investigator* we found that instead of the metal being 2 millimetres thick, which it had been when we started out, it was now almost twice that thickness because of the rust coating. They said the inner lining had not been affected in any way and this was good news for everyone. But what was the brown coating? The sample went away to the laboratory for analysis and was found to be rust. The actual metal was only 1 millimetre thick now with 3 millimetres of rust adhering to it. The science report said this coating was really a good sign. They always found good in everything, even rust. They said the rust was so hard it gave the cruiser extra protection. Therefore, it was not a problem at all. So far nothing had been a problem to the scientists. All the problems appeared to be in the passengers' minds. Having only 1 millimetre of solid metal on the outside of the *Investigator* sounded like a problem to me.

After a full week there was another direction change and we began to pick up speed once more using the forward fins. We had checked both fins forward and rear and found them to be in excellent condition. This was strange considering the rest of the cruiser was rusty. I watched as my window again turned black and then orange. We remained at orange for a few days and then went to yellow and on through to green. They were really messing up my estimation on how far we were from Earth. No one seemed to have any idea. After a week we were again slowing and another announcement came over the speakers to say we were approaching *Terra Nouvelle*. People were becoming excited now about the prospects of seeing another planet. I know I was. It wasn't long and out of my window there was a light blue sky and a semi-circular haze. Through other windows you could see a close up view of *Terra Nouvelle*. I reckoned Peaterr was the most pleased to see the planet.

He said, "Finally they have found something like what they were looking for."

I said to him, "Didn't they know what the planet was going to look like?"

And he answered, "They didn't know this planet even existed. It has been a guess from start to finish. But the computers have been studying this planet for a few weeks and it appears remarkably like Earth."

I think we were probably about 250 light years from Earth now, give or take a thousand light years. Travelling at blue speed it had been hard to estimate. There were no official figures available yet, was the answer Dad had received from the scientists. They would not be able to divulge any details for a long while due to secrecy provisions. I could see why this was. I might write to someone on Earth and they would find out about this place 250 years later. If they wanted to get in touch with me about it they could write back and ask me and I would receive their letter 500 years after I wrote to them. Who would I know on Earth still alive in 250 years time in any case? Get real! Some said knowledge was power but I think they didn't really know where we were or what was going to happen next.

Well, it sure looked a little bit like Earth and it had a sun a bit larger than Earth's. The planet was a bit further away from its sun than Earth is from its. The planet was almost the same size as Earth. This may have been a disappointment to anyone wanting to weigh less on this planet. It was officially named *Terra Nouvelle* by our captain. Too bad if there were people already living there!

We were now orbiting our new planet, a place we would soon call home. At school we received lots of information on our computers about *Terra Nouvelle*. I read this with great interest. We had to write an essay about it. I wrote one on how we found giants living there that just loved peoples' blood. Mr. Prentice again commented that my imagination was very good, but my spelling wasn't up to scratch. I got an 'A' for it all the same, so I was happy. The planet, according to measurements made by the scientists, had a canopy of water vapour covering the surface to a height of about 5 kilometres.

Its axis was straight up and down which meant there was no summer or winter on the planet. We could pick a temperate-zone to live in and have fairly constant temperatures throughout the year. Temperate zones were through the centre of the planet. At each pole were 2 large polar caps. There was a night and day of approximately 10 hours each (our time) which meant it was spinning a bit quicker than Earth. There were no moons circling this planet, so night would be really dark. Day would not be sunny like that on Earth, especially not like in Australia. It would be permanently overcast and misty. People were beginning to complain about this but others pointed out that we had all been together on the *Investigator* for a year without any ill effects, except for the season change sickness, even though we hadn't seen the real sun during this time.

We were all to get new computer clocks for the planet. There would now be 100 seconds in a minute, 100 minutes in an hour and 10 hours in a day and 10 hours in a night. Day hours would be 1 to 10 with a D after the hour to show it was day and night would be 1 to 10 with N after the hour to show it was night. Slight automatic adjustments might be necessary to time later but we need not worry about that. There were other things we were told about *Terra Nouvelle*, but these were the major ones.

Most of us would remain on the *Investigator* while an advance party paid a visit to the surface of the planet. In a week this party was ready to go in the *Tom Thumb*,

the shuttle-craft that had been waiting all this time to be used just for this purpose. The craft was designed to take up to 25 people through the planet's atmosphere, and deliver them safely on land on the surface of the planet. Now here is a question – how do we know there is land there and how much? Scientists said there would be and not to worry about that. When the *Tom Thumb* left the *Investigator* our maintenance team was watching from the outside of the cruiser. We saw it launch from the cruiser and fly around it as a kind of salute before heading off out of sight. When we returned inside I quickly joined my school mates watching its progress on my computer screen.

The whole class watched as it seemed to burn, going through the atmosphere and then it was in cloud. It didn't look like thick cloud, more like a mist. They were close to the surface of the planet before much could be seen. We could see green patches and brown patches. The green looked like water and the brown like Earth. Then there was some dark green and lighter green. We couldn't understand much of the communication going on between the people on board the *Tom Thumb* and our scientists, mainly because the noise in the classroom was deafening every time something new came up. Everyone was so excited. I don't know how long they stayed in the air but it was probably an hour or so and then the *Tom Thumb* touched down gently on the planet.

The *Tom Thumb* is a VTOL (Vertical, Take-off and Landing) craft so it put down like a helicopter. Not a lot seemed to be happening for a while, but I guess they had to compute what all the sensors were telling them about the planet and its atmosphere. We noticed that the *Tom Thumb* looked like it was tilting a bit. Next we saw it rise up again and move across the surface once more until it came to a halt. I think the first time they had landed in a thick swamp. Now the surface was looking more solid. I was starving because I hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast and it was now after lunchtime. I asked Mr. Prentice if I could be excused to get something to eat. When I left the classroom three people were getting ready to leave the *Tom Thumb*. They were in their space suits.

After getting something to eat from home and returning to class, they were just about to remove their space suits outside. Boy it takes a long time to do anything. They were breathing the air there. I could see one of them coughing. I hoped this wasn't a bad sign.

We heard the comment, "Fresh air will do that to you, George."

Obviously this was a little 'new planet' humour. They walked around a little gingerly at first but said it felt like walking in the country on Earth. The sky was pale and not oppressive they said, and it was much better than living for a year in the *Investigator*. They would carry out more tests.

The class finished a little earlier than usual. Mr. Prentice knew he wouldn't get any more work out of us after this.

I went up to Mr. Prentice and said, "Things are beginning to work out now."

And he said, "Weren't they before?"

I replied, "We were told by scientists we were going to *Terra Nouvelle* one light year from Earth, and that wasn't right for a start."

He said, "You know what they really told us? They told us we were going to a new planet called *Terra Nouvelle* and it would take us about a year to get there. They didn't say it was a light year way. I've checked the letter they sent me. We all assumed it was a light year away because we were subconsciously limiting ourselves

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to the speed of light. It took a little longer to get here than a year but they said ‘about a year’ in the letter. Also we are at *Terra Nouvelle* as promised because the captain has given this planet that name.”

Mr. Prentice was right as usual.

Chapter 10 Whose turn is it next?

All I knew now was I wanted to be out of here, out of the *Investigator* that is, and exploring our new world. I wanted to know if there were any ants and flies to spoil a picnic – little things like that. But as always we were doing the same old things, going to school and maintaining the *Investigator*. We weren't getting any more information from *Terra Nouvelle* now. Everything happening from the first day onwards was confidential and the domain of the scientists, Peaterr told me.

How do 1,500 people get off the *Investigator*, I asked myself? How come I hadn't thought of that before? I think it was because I still couldn't really believe we had arrived. But the answer was quite simple. We would remain on board for another month and then we would have holidays for 2 months. How many days were in a month now? That's right, there were 40 and we had 10 months to a year. There were also 10 days in a week and 4 weeks in a month. So we would have 80 days off. That was great. On board we kept to Earth time but on *Terra Nouvelle* we would straight away go over to 'Terra' time as it had been coined. Whatever the case, I was sure that somehow we would be missing out on this holiday because of the conversion. Although it might appear to be a longer time, were 80 'Terra' days really worth 60 Earth days?

What was I talking about? I know; how did everyone get off the cruiser? Apart from the *Tom Thumb* there was another craft, one that could hold 150 people. That meant only 10 trips all up – no worries. And that was if we were all going to get off that way. At the end of another maintenance session Peaterr took me aside and asked me if I was interested in a bit of exploring of our new planet. He said because he had headed up the best maintenance team on the voyage, he had been made the captain of the explorer craft. If I wanted to I could join him as his lieutenant. I asked him if his explorer craft had a name and he told me it could be *Endeavour* if I wanted to go. I would be Lieutenant Cook of the *Endeavour*. Of course I wanted to go, buzzer! The only problem I could see with the whole thing was that my parents might not share the same enthusiasm. They would think it was dangerous. Then I thought; how dangerous was it to go on this voyage in the first place? Anyway, Peaterr said not to worry about that, he would speak to Mum and Dad that night.

I couldn't remember if Peaterr had met my parents before or not, so when he showed up at our place I introduced him to them and then we all sat down in the lounge room, except Sue who had already gone to bed. Peaterr started off by saying how proud they should be of me. They agreed with him about my new found maturity – hey I was 13! I sat there embarrassed; like always when people talked about me. But it was good to be there and not be left out of the discussion. Peaterr had said to Dad that I should be present when they discussed what he had to say and Dad had not disagreed with him.

Peaterr quickly got to the point of the meeting and asked if I could join him on the explorer trip about to happen now we had reached *Terra Nouvelle*. Dad had some questions, of course, like how would I do my schooling? Peaterr said we would only be away for 4 to 6 weeks and it would be holiday time soon. He said that even if it did go on longer that the education I would be getting on board the *Endeavour* would outweigh anything I learned at school. I would be using science, mathematics and English in everyday life. Probably a lot more than I was doing at present. Dad said my

writing hadn't been what was expected even though I had written a book recently. I needed to brush up on spelling etc. Peaterr said one of my jobs would be to keep the log on board the explorer craft. Peaterr was great. He could answer all of Dad's questions.

Then Mum said, "But would he be safe, flying around in a land that no one knows much about? We would also miss him very much."

Peaterr just said. "I can't guarantee Kaavan's safety. Can you guarantee his safety going down to the surface of the planet with you? Would you have put your family through what has already happened if you had known earlier what it would entail? I know that you will miss him, but it is only for a few weeks and then he will be back with you. I see this as a big part in Kaavan's growing up. Like his maintenance work, which you saw as an opportunity for him. This is an even bigger one that I know Kaavan doesn't want to pass up."

Peaterr was brilliant and so were Mum and Dad for letting me go. In a week we would be off. There would be three scientists going with us. So the full complement of the *Endeavour* would be five people. Peaterr would be in-charge and fly the craft but there would be times when I could fly. I would really be engineer / co-pilot. The scientists would study the environment at different landing points. Both Peaterr and I would be mapping the land and oceans as we flew, aided by on-board computers. The scientists would be able to plug into the computers and see what was happening at any time. We had to carry everything we needed for the trip and be sure not to pollute the environment. What would we see? The advance party had set up camp on an island, as they discovered later. We would scout around more and find a mainland more suitable for the remainder of the *Investigators'* people to live on. The advance party had taken many measurements, and these were being relayed to the *Investigator*. They had had glimpses of what they thought was a bigger land mass south of them when some had taken the *Tom Thumb* on a flight after setting up a temporary camp.

The island they were on was mainly flat with lush grasses and the occasional swamp. It had fresh water and the air there was fine for people to breathe. They were feeling good after over a week stationed there. The flight to what they thought was a larger piece of land showed it was covered in large trees, but they couldn't get close enough to see beneath the canopy. It was like the dense rain forests of Earth. They had not seen any signs of life other than vegetation. I made sure I read up on all the reports being put out about *Terra Nouvelle*. I think I knew more about it after a week than I did about the Earth after living there for 12 years. It was very important to find out as much as we could before we left the *Investigator*.

It was time to leave my family and friends now. Sue wasn't happy to see me go. Even though we had always been brother and sister, it wasn't until we left Earth that we had become really good friends. I guess I had been looking after her a bit better in space. She had made lots of friends from all over the world while in the cruiser, which was great. In fact, I think she spent less time at home than I did these days. She had learned to speak Spanish by spending time with one of her friends and her friend's family. She had grown up lots, a lot more than she would have on Earth. She was not nearly as self-conscious either.

Anyway, after the long farewells and the usual 'be careful and have you got enough warm clothes' from my Mum, we were ready to go. I had spent only two days on the simulator but Peaterr had spent much more and had flown one of these craft

while on Earth. He said he might be a bit rusty to start with but being computerised throughout, it would be easy to fly. The scientists were late and we had to wait about an hour for them to fuss around loading their stuff on board. Apart from scientific gear, most of which had been fitted to the craft already, they had found other things to bring along. They had a real problem working out where the wine should be stored because it might not travel well. I think that if the wine had made it from Earth to here at many times the speed of light it should make it the rest of the way.

There were many things on board *Investigator* that we would miss out on while exploring. We would be very dependent on what we found on the surface of the planet. The water we carried would only last a few days. We had lots of food, enough for the trip if we were careful with it. Most of it was dried to keep the weight down. Anyway, more about that later. I was sure I had left something behind but I think everyone thinks that before a trip. I hoped whatever it was it wasn't important. Finally we were off. The hatch opened and we taxied out just like we did in the *Limpet*. But when on the outside we took off into space. I could tell Peaterr was as good a pilot of this craft as he was of the other. You can just tell when a pilot has complete control. I wasn't allowed to touch anything yet.

I was content to look around at everything because it was all new to me. This was the first time in over a year I had been away from the cruiser. As we flew unattached to the cruiser I saw a more three dimensional picture of the *Investigator*. It looked like an old building now, one that had seen years of wear. For one thing it didn't shine, it was very rusty and the windows were a burnt orange colour. I would have been getting a dull view from inside my room. But out here everything looked bright and new.

We circled the *Investigator* like the *Tom Thumb* had before setting our sights on the new planet or 'New Earth' as it now was. I liked this better than the French words. Why not 'New Earth' or just *NE*?

We could call out to people we might meet there, "NE body out there?"

Well, this made Peaterr chuckle aboard the *Endeavour* even if it didn't do much for the intrepid scientists who were complaining about the comfort, or rather the lack of it, in the back seat of the little craft. We were wearing space suits but these could be packed away as soon as we were down on *NE*. *NE* is what I will call *Terra Nouvelle* from now on.

I made a note of our departure time and date on the computer log. The recording of the *Endeavour's* progress would be a combination of my notes and those the computer automatically made as we went along. The computer would virtually make a map of where we had been while we flew over the planet. We could later see photos and a map of anything of interest. If there was a coastline and we followed it, even at speed, the computer would construct a map of it. We would make up names for important places we found. This would be great fun if I had any input but I wasn't sure how much to press my luck with Peaterr. Now, it wasn't just working with him occasionally, it was living side by side and those in the back of the craft who were behaving a little like children at the moment.

I felt like asking Peaterr, "Are we there yet?"

Chapter 11 Proper exploring at last

We could really feel the heat aboard this light spacecraft as we pushed through *NE's* atmosphere. Then we went through cloud followed by a gentle mist. We could just see the ground – or was it water? Our first landing place would be where the *Tom Thumb* had set down and we were heading straight for their coordinates. Its earthly occupants had named the island 'Lonely Island'. It didn't take much time at all after entering *NE's* atmosphere to be overhead. We circled the island to see for ourselves how big it was and also to see which way the wind was blowing. With the lack of trees it was hard to know the wind direction or speed. Peaterr called the *Tom Thumb* and the answer was 'light and variable' winds. This meant we could land in any direction and Peaterr put down close to the *Tom Thumb*. Our craft was not a VTOL craft but a STOL (Short Take-off and Landing) craft. This meant we could land in a short distance not requiring much of a runway but we couldn't come to a halt and descend vertically. On our exploration we would be taking off and putting down frequently and to be a VTOL would require too much fuel to be carried on board. Even though the fuel was only water and would probably be easy enough to get, it was the weight of the fuel that limited the *Endeavour* to being a STOL craft. Space inside the craft was at a premium and limiting the fuel capacity allowed the scientists to cram in as much gear as they thought they would need for the trip.

After arriving we were swamped by people – the whole 25 of them came to say hello and shake our hands. They were glad to see us because it meant contact with others from the *Investigator* and because they would be relying on us to find a nice place for a more permanent settlement. Their food resources were going down faster than they had expected. Many of them had consumed more food than usual because of the manual work they were doing in putting up temporary shelter and making life a little more comfortable for everyone. The thing we mainly felt on landing was light rain. We hadn't seen rain for over a year. It was very gentle, almost drizzle and it wasn't at all cold. The temperature was 25 degrees and the others said it only ranged from 25 degrees during the day to about 22 degrees at night. It wasn't always drizzling but they had only had one day when it hadn't rained at all from the time they got here just over a week ago. Visibility was better than I expected in a land of so much moisture. Even though the sun was never seen, the cloud cover could be high, allowing for good visibility most of the time.

We had lunch with them. I think that was what it was. My timing was out that day. I was hungry in any case and ate well. After lunch Peaterr, a couple of the workers on the island and myself, took the rockets used in coming through *NE's* atmosphere off the *Endeavour*. We would not need these again until we were to return to the *Investigator*. This made our craft lighter. We would now be using the two more conventional motors aboard to explore *NE*. It was these motors that were powered by hydrogen.

We spent part of the day washing and polishing the *Endeavour* because it had become really dirty entering *NE's* atmosphere. This also gave us a chance to look for any damage. The craft looked fine. We were now ready to get going next morning. The rest of the day was spent chatting to people about the island and seeing their accommodation. They had made the place reasonably comfortable. They had better facilities than we would have over the next few weeks of camping. Next morning

everyone again turned out to see us off. We decided to stow our space suits away in the *Tom Thumb* and not transport them around with us. That saved us some room. So we would now be lighter and less bulky aboard the *Endeavour*. We got on board and waved goodbye as Peaterr started our two hydrogen engines. Again there was little breeze so he decided to take off directly ahead. I checked that the computers were activated and looked around to see if the scientists were strapped in. They were very quiet this morning. We took off shortly after and circled the island once more seeing people waving to us. They had really done well over the past week in organising themselves. Water wasn't a problem but food would be soon. They needed a place they could settle and find food to eat. They could then grow vegetables and things we had brought with us from Earth and make it just like home. So far it looked like we would have to be vegetarian. No one had seen anything other than vegetation.

After speaking to those in the know on the island, Peaterr had decided to go west and see if we could find a bigger stretch of land for them to live on. The land down south had been seen to be just another island. If we did find a larger stretch of land we would radio them with our coordinates and they would re-locate their settlement. The weather on take-off was fine but overcast, of course. We had a good view ahead if we didn't go above about 1,000 metres. We were now travelling over an ocean or sea of some kind. The water looked very green – not blue like I was used to. However, I guess with overcast sky it might make the sea look green. It looked clean enough when we flew close to it. We continued to fly due west for about 200 kilometres. Then up ahead Peaterr and I both at the same time, saw what looked like land with a mountain on it. This mountain wasn't very high but it was the highest point we had seen on *NE*. As the mountain looked a lot like Mt. Dromedary in New South Wales, Australia, I wanted it to be called that. Mt. Dromedary was a place Captain Cook (really Lieutenant at that stage) named after sailing across from New Zealand. The significance of this was not lost on Peaterr but neither was its importance to me.

Peaterr said, "Okay, you can call this mountain Mt. Dromedary, but it is your last naming of places until further notice."

I nodded my head and wrote in the computer log – 'Lieutenant Cook named the first mountain seen in this new land, Mt. Dromedary because it reminded him of the shape of a camel's hump.' This did make me feel good. I didn't want all the place names to be the same as in Australia. I wasn't familiar with many of the people Captain Cook had named places after anyway, so they didn't have any meaning to me. But Mt. Dromedary did. It really does look like its namesake in Australia, truly!

We flew over the mountain without going into cloud. It was covered in trees. The computer read the height of Mt. Dromedary as 200 metres. We were flying just 200 metres above it. As we turned over the top of the peak we could see sand on the shore, followed by small scrub and bushes. Then not far inland the landscape changed to heavily timbered forest, almost jungle. The jungle continued inland as far as the eye could see from this height. After circling, we turned north and followed the coastline for about 300 kilometres. There were a few inlets on the way and a number of rivers leading into the country. There were no cleared areas that we could make out. Peaterr was wondering whether we should fly further inland or go back to where we started and fly south for a while. I said if there was nothing inland, maybe the advance party could settle on the beach and clear some land as they expanded.

Peaterr didn't want to back track over places we'd already seen, so we continued for a further 200 kilometres before heading inland. The land was becoming hilly as we travelled along this part of the coast, not close to shore but further in. The cloud was now at about 2000 metres from the ground and we could see further in front of us than before. There were some pretty sharp looking cliffs leading down to rivers that entered the sea. One hundred kilometres north we came across what looked like a clearing alongside a wide river mouth; almost a harbour. I wondered why we hadn't come across harbours but I guess it was because the rivers here had cut their way through very solid rock and remained narrow. Also with gentle rain or drizzle there wasn't the rush of water down mountainsides to cut a wider path.

We flew over the clearing, which was alongside the river mouth and turned 180 degrees and flew back over the patch at 200 metres altitude and as slow as we could travel, which was about 100 kilometres per hour. This looked to be an interesting spot to land. It was about a kilometre from the sandy beach and it ran right down to the river. After a few passes Peaterr put the *Endeavour* down on not so solid ground. The wheels of the craft dug in and we were very fortunate not to ground loop or go head over turkey. We just came to a sudden stop at the end. No one was hurt from the jolt and we were out of the craft in a matter of seconds looking around. Although the ground was soft it was nice soil and not sand. Only grass grew here like on 'Lonely Island' but the soil was much better. This was alluvial soil according to one of the scientists and would be great for earthly vegetation. I was standing in about 8 inches of fine grass. I took my shoes off and felt the grass between my toes. What a great feeling this was. I had never felt softer grass.

While Peaterr looked over the *Endeavour* the scientists spread out just a little. One was picking grass samples and smelling them, another was digging a patch of soil up. Each had a small knife, a pencil and a clipboard with paper on it. They were making notes. The third scientist had wandered off and I could see him in the distance heading down to the river. Seeing he was going that way I headed across the plain towards the trees. The grass suddenly stopped and the trees started. They were huge trees, much bigger than anything I had seen on Earth and I had seen giant gums and redwood trees. These were at least twice the height and circumference and were as straight as 20th century telegraph poles all the way to the top. There was no grass growing in the forest because the light didn't get through. It was very dark inside there. From the edge I could only see into it about 20 metres. I looked at the bark and leaves that had fallen from the trees. It was covering the ground. It smelt a bit musty.

There was no wind to blow the trees, which had big leaves. At close range I could see leaves that had fallen. They were about twice the size of any tree leaf I had seen on Earth. I was about to turn and head back when I saw what I thought was a footprint. Was this my imagination? There was just one on the softer soil heading towards the forest. It looked like a foot with toes, just like a person's, except it was about half as big again. It had a prominent big toe that stuck out at 45 degrees from the rest of the foot. I found a stick and put it into the ground to mark the spot and turned and headed off to the others.

We were all making our way back to the *Endeavour*. We had probably all found something of interest in the short time and wanted to share it with the others. When I arrived back, the scientist who had been down to the river said the water was a bit brackish but thought further up stream it would be drinkable. They said we didn't

really understand how things worked on *NE*. I'm glad they called it *NE*. This name might catch on with everyone yet. He went on to say that because there was no moon there were no tides. He didn't know how river water mixed with sea or ocean water and until now hadn't known that the planet had salt water, but he was pretty certain the seawater was salty. He said on Earth without the moon and tides a lot of water would be stagnant. However, because it rained most of the time here there was always a flow of water to the sea. And the sea remained okay because of the preserving characteristics of salt. When there was a slight lull in the conversation I said, "I think I found a footprint."

In unison the scientists said, "What?"

I pointed over to the trees where I had been and told them exactly what I had seen, its size and how the big toe went at a 45-degree angle from the actual foot.

I really thought they would say, "That's a good joke."

And I think that was Peaterr's first impression. Then I realised these scientists had a very lightly developed sense of humour.

They spoke amongst themselves very seriously, one saying, "If it was a primitive primate the toe would come from the foot at that angle because they wouldn't have had their toes restricted through the wearing of shoes."

They had believed me. I looked at Peaterr and saw his smile disappear. "Are you serious about this, Kaavan?"

I said I was only reporting what I saw as a scientist should. I could see Peaterr wasn't convinced.

"Where is this footprint?" said one of the scientists.

I said I would show them and we headed off in the direction that I had placed the stick. Peaterr stayed behind to dig a track from the *Endeavour* along the ground to get ready for take-off later. He also wanted to make sure the soil up further wasn't softer than where we were because this might cause problems taking off.

I took the three scientists to where I thought I had placed the stick but was not able to find it again. All the land on the edge of the forest looked the same. I don't know what happened to it. I knew I'd never find the footprint again without the stick and that was why I pushed it into the ground, where the footprint was. But it was no longer in the ground and the footprint was nowhere to be seen. I felt like an idiot and the scientists mumbled to themselves. We headed back to the *Endeavour* for lunch. Lunch comprised a sandwich each, coffee with milk and a piece of fruitcake. This went down without touching the sides.

Peaterr later said to me, "You really think you saw a footprint. It isn't a joke on the scientists?"

I told him, "I am serious about what I saw and that's why I wanted the scientists to see it for themselves. It really did look like a footprint and I don't know where the stick has gone to."

He just said, "Then I believe you, as always."

For a young guy like me it is so good to have someone on your side. I was so lucky that Peaterr was there. The scientists were whispering about me, I could tell. It certainly gave them something to think about. I said I could have been mistaken but that was what it looked like to me.

Had we found a spot for the first permanent settlement on *NE*? That was the question. Should we tell the others to move here or should we look further? The

scientists weren't interested in getting back into the *Endeavour* that day. They sniffed around the clearing looking for signs of animal life. They would have been overjoyed at finding a snail or something they could study. They had really only dug around where we landed. Peaterr decided we would stay the night there and continue searching in the morning. He was unable to contact the advance party by HF radio but would try again when in the air on VHF. We didn't have much to tell them today anyway. I helped Peaterr set up the tents for the night and it looked like a pretty good campsite. The scientists continued to dig around. Peaterr discovered the rubber raft we had on board and we carried it down to the water. We paddled out into the middle of the river and fished without getting a bite. This didn't prove there wasn't any fish in the water; it probably just meant we were useless at catching fish.

When we returned to the *Endeavour* late afternoon, the scientists were busy dissecting a grub they had found in the soil. After they found one, their eyes had adjusted and they could see lots of others in the soil. These grubs were very thin and to the human eye blended in perfectly with the soil. They had the best camouflage of any animal I had seen. The scientists seemed to think these animals were *NE's* equivalent to earthworms because they couldn't see anything else inside them other than Earth. But this was something. They thought they were probably on 'Lonely Island' as well but no one had let their eyes see something that was so different from that on Earth.

Now this posed a problem. Had we just been looking for what we wanted to see? How do we train our eyes to pick up unearthly animals? What did *NE* ants look like? What do people with big feet look like on *NE*? Did I just see a footprint because I wanted to see one? Imagination would start to play strangely with us all. For the first time I could see the advantages of having scientists along with us. I would never have found these worms in a million years.

Chapter 12 What else is there to find?

Later that night Peaterr called the *Investigator* on the radio and got them straight away. They were easier to reach than the *Tom Thumb* even though they were much further away. Because of the *Investigator's* orbit we wouldn't always be able to contact them but at this time they came in loud and clear. We just passed on messages to people. I wanted my family to know I was okay and even more importantly that I was having a great time. Peaterr just gave the message that we were all well. The scientists then rabbited on about their discovery. It had the whole of the scientific world on board the *Investigator* going wild. Peaterr also passed on a message for them to relay to the *Tom Thumb*. The message was that we had found a suitable spot for settlement but that it might be best to wait a few days, if they could hold out that long before moving, in case we found some place better. That was the end of communication for the night and we turned in early.

Next morning at first light we were up and about and after breakfast I wanted to wash in the river but was stopped by one of the scientists. He even had a go at me for not thinking. He was astounded that I would go and dive into the water just as I would on Earth. He said there were tests to do to make sure it was safe. For the next hour the scientists tested the water microbiologically, as they had done the air and soil earlier. Then I went for my wash and swim in the river. It was a good experience. At least we could now be clean when we travelled. It wouldn't be much fun being stuck in the *Endeavour* at close quarters with four other smelly people. Everyone took a bath in the water that morning without any ill effects.

The water was quite warm and as on *Lonely Island* the temperature only went down a few degrees at night from the daytime temperature, which was just about perfect at 25 degrees. It was shorts and tee shirt weather for all, day and night. We only wore our thin dryplas coats to keep dry when it was drizzling. Dryplas is just another plastic. Everything made up of microfibre material we call plastic. I had quickly changed my footwear to waterproof boots to protect my feet.

I thought the river water might have been too warm for fish but one scientist commented that there may have been fish all around us but we just hadn't recognised them. Maybe he was right and they were invisible to us in this environment. Anyway, we were now ready to take to the sky and look around for more places of interest. I was hoping I could train my eye to pick up things but I really didn't know how to get that scientist impression of things. However, I might have been the first to see a person-like footprint here on *NE*?

At about 2D, *NE* time, (not just anytime time, joke) we headed off. I think by Earth time 2D is around 8 am. I didn't mention what we had for breakfast as it was back to our rations of powdered egg on the last of the bread we had been given at the advance party camp. From now on it would be just about powdered everything. I don't know how earlier space travellers lived on tubes of food and tablets. Over time they became sick but they wouldn't have survived without it. Really I shouldn't complain about powdered food. It isn't as though we will need to eat it forever. It is only while we are travelling around. Then the team will be working on providing fresh food for us, even better than the reconstituted food we were used to on the *Investigator*.

The take-off was fine even though the ground was soft and wet. The *Endeavour* showed it could get quickly into the air. The landings could be more of a problem than take-off. The weight of the craft could cause it to sink in moist soils. Speaking of moist soils, one of the scientists said he had planted some carrot seeds in the soil and if we were up that way again we could see if they had grown. He didn't think we would have any trouble getting things to grow. We were in a hot house more or less. It was very comfortable when we became used to the wet atmosphere. Our tents had been packed away a little wet and we were hoping they wouldn't go mouldy stowed away in that condition. We would have them out again tonight so they wouldn't be folded up wet for long.

We flew for about another 100 kilometres up the coast. There were many sandy beaches but not much surf. The water just washed up gently onto the coastline, more with a ripple effect than a wave motion. From the air we couldn't see any life on land or on water or in the water for that matter. Not a shark to be seen even a couple of miles off the coast. The countryside changed very little going from one forest to another after crossing narrow rivers with sharp banks. Peaterr thought it time to go inland so we headed west again after our detour up north.

We flew over what looked like never ending forest until up in front of us was a huge mountain range. It came up suddenly just after the *Endeavour's* navigation computer beeped out a warning and flashed a red light. Peaterr straight away turned due south and we flew along the range with its sheer cliffs. We couldn't see the top of most mountains for cloud. The computer was telling us they were 5,000 metres in height. Nothing grew on the sharp slopes. These mountains looked like they were made of granite sticking straight out of the surrounding forest. Peaterr made the decision to check out what was on the other side of this steep range. One of the scientists was sure that the vegetation would be completely different that far away from the sea.

Turning east and climbing to 6,000 metres in quick time, Peaterr turned 180 degrees and we headed west. We had gone into cloud at about 4,000 metres. We were unable to see anything but cloud. The radar showed an amazing rocky area below us, which continued for about 10 minutes travelling at our low speed of 100 kilometres per hour. The computer kept mapping even though we couldn't see a metre in front of us. And as quickly as the mountains appeared they disappeared according to the radar. Peaterr slowly brought the craft lower and lower until the cloud turned into a light mist. We continued across a forest that wasn't as thick as that on the coast but had trees that looked twice as big.

We turned south and followed the level country. The radar said it was 600 metres above sea level. We continued our flight along endless forest until abeam Mt. Dromedary, where we had crossed the coast the day before. Peaterr decided to continue on in a southerly direction, but it became evident after a few hours that the landscape would not change. So we turned east and headed for the coast, climbing to 5,000 metres this time to clear the mountains that were not quite as high as those up north. When we hit the coast we turned south and continued along it looking for another flat spot to land. We didn't find anything suitable and turned north once more.

We were getting hungry doing all this flying so the scientists handed around food bars to keep us going, maybe past lunch and close to dinner time. All the while, the navigation computer was mapping what it saw below us. We were getting a good

picture of a sizeable chunk of land. At least this wasn't a small island we had discovered. This was a decent sized part of the planet that people could live on and investigate further. We kept flying until Dromedary, where Peaterr decided to take a chance on landing on the sandy beach. After flying close to the ground it looked as though a band of sand just up from the water would be harder than the soil we had landed on earlier – more of the unknown that we needed to find out about. None of our computers could tell us whether it was suitable for landing or take-off. Peaterr kept the northerly heading and put it down as gently as he could with the mountain just to the left of us. The landing was perfect and the *Endeavour* came down gently onto *NE* once more. We ate a lunch / afternoon tea of powdered something mixed with water and heated on our portable stove. It tasted okay because we were hungry.

After lunch I walked along the beach in a northerly direction and the scientists went to investigate the bushes that ran up to the thick forest. Peaterr, after checking the *Endeavour*, lay down on the sand to sleep. He had been working hard, flying for hours. The weather was overcast but fine. I became quite hot walking along the beach. Although it was only 25 degrees it would have been close to 100 percent humidity. I took off my boots and let the sand get between my toes. I put my foot into the water. It stung a bit so I took it straight out again. A thin layer of salt began to dry on my foot. I was hoping it was salt. I sat down and after scraping a bit off, tasted it. It had a sharp salty taste. I noticed I had a slight cut on the side of my foot. The high concentration of salt had hurt my foot. I wondered how I had cut my foot. I walked back into the water and it no longer hurt. In fact, when I came out of the water I could no longer find the cut.

The water felt good on the skin when I was in it but as soon as I came out the salt hardened and was uncomfortable. I thought that it would be better if it was raining to wash the salt off. One thing this weather was doing for everyone was giving them nice skin. I didn't want to mention it but I was starting to get a good batch of pimples on my face when I was on board the *Investigator* but over the last couple of days they had almost disappeared and my skin was becoming smooth. Everyone in the advance party on 'Lonely Island' had lovely smooth skin, although it was very white. It was hard to tell with Peaterr and the scientists because they had started to grow beards. But I was sure underneath the hair there would be nice smooth skin too.

I thought about going for a proper swim but decided against it for two reasons. One, I would be all crusty with salt when I came out and two, there might be fish in there that I couldn't see and they might be man eating if they knew what a man was. I returned briefly to the scientists who were fussing over different kinds of leaves they had found and then walked back to the *Endeavour* where Peaterr was lying down. He said he had fallen asleep. He was considering whether to fly back to where we had camped last night or stay here on the beach. With only a couple of hours of daylight left (only 10 hours here remember) he decided to stay put. We would set up camp here for the night. I helped him get everything ready and when we had finished, the scientists wandered back still discussing what they had found.

The weather was fine for *NE*, which meant overcast and a little damp but it wasn't drizzling. I said to Peaterr that I would sleep out that night instead of being in the tent. He suggested I get under one of the wings of *Endeavour* just in case it started drizzling in the night. After having by now a usual dinner of food that we just added water to, Peaterr went into his tent and I listened to what the scientists had to say

about the leaves they had collected. They were saying that in this moist atmosphere plants had a tremendous opportunity to keep on growing. Some of the trees we had seen they estimated to be thousands of years old. Leaves could also grow many times larger than on Earth because there was no sun shining directly on them drying them out. In fact, they needed to be as big as they were in order to make the most of the light for photosynthesis.

These were plants they were talking about, but I wanted to know about animals and whether they thought there would be more than just the worms we had seen. One of them said he was sure there would be more discoveries made. He also said that going by the size of the plants, there could be large animals on this planet, probably much larger than on Earth. This was because they had more chance of living longer in this temperate climate. There could be animals like crocodiles growing 20 metres long. I asked them whether there could be dinosaurs and they said they couldn't rule out that possibility. At that moment I wondered about the footprint I thought I had seen. It was very large. Maybe it belonged to an animal like a person that was 150 years old and 3 metres tall. I didn't mention the footprint to them. It could have been my vivid imagination playing tricks on me.

I was getting tired and lay down on the ground sheet I had brought along. I was under the left wing of the *Endeavour*. I remembered camping with Mum, Dad and Sue back on Earth. Before going into our tent we used to lie next to a fire and look up at the stars. I wouldn't have been able to see any stars under this wing anyway but on *NE* you don't see stars because of the cloud, and there isn't a moon to see either. When night comes that is it – extreme darkness. I was glad we hadn't tried to go back to our other camping spot because we may not have made it before dark and it would have been difficult for Peaterr to land. In the dark we wouldn't have known where we were setting up camp either. Even with the lights we wouldn't have been able to see very far around us.

Lying there and having time to think I became less tired. I lay awake thinking of Mum, Dad and Sue. I had thought of them before this, but I felt alone now and I began to get homesick for them. I know it had only been a couple of days since leaving *Investigator* but we had done a lot in that time. I became very sad. What if something happened and I never saw them again. There were a lot of things that could happen and we would be all alone. We may never be found way out here. After a while I did fall asleep and didn't wake until it was light. I think it takes about five minutes here to go from light to dark at night and five minutes to change from dark to light in the morning.

Peaterr was already up and checking the *Endeavours'* engines. When he saw me getting up he said he was sorry for waking me. I don't think he did wake me, I think I had just woken up by myself. He said we would have to get some fresh water soon not just for us to drink and add to our powder meals but for fuel. I still find it amazing that both hydrogen and oxygen, which the *Endeavour* uses for fuel, can be extracted from water. There is no pollution with these motors either. The *Endeavour's* hydrogen motors are jets and very flexible. We could cruise around like we had been doing at 100 kilometres per hour or accelerate to Mach II if we wanted to.

The *Endeavour* is what they call a hybrid craft – truly subsonic, transonic and supersonic whenever it needs to be. Its wings can change from straight out and long with an aerofoil shape for subsonic flight to being shorter for transonic (able to go

faster than the speed of sound). Then they can shorten even more and take on a sharp leading edge to enable the craft to travel to Mach II (twice the speed of sound), which Peaterr said was twice 660 knots at sea level on Earth. He guessed it would be pretty similar here. He had also told me that the jet engines worked a lot more efficiently at altitude where the air was thinner. We had used a lot of fuel (water) over the last few days. I'd have to think about what a knot was. Peaterr's explanation that a knot was 6080 feet per hour didn't help one bit. What was a foot? He liked using archaic terms for things. He had read about all these measurements in history books.

After breakfast and packing up we had a team meeting. Because we had been flying slow and low over the last couple of days we hadn't covered much ground over the land mass we were on. It had been good to actually see the ground and get some idea of it but we hadn't come across anything really suited to starting up a settlement. We really didn't have much time to look around because resources were running out for the advance party. One of the scientists said we needed to find out whether any of the plants around were suitable as food. From what I had seen of the trees and plants I wouldn't have thought they'd be of much value at all. I also thought it strange to think that the scientists hadn't had a bit of a taste of the plants they found already. However, they said they had and they tasted about how you would expect them to taste. They were worried about tasting too many varieties in case one of them became sick and they couldn't identify which plant had caused the illness. I guess that would be a real problem for us and for that matter those on the island. The scientists thought there would be plenty more plants to discover.

Peaterr joined in at this point, suggesting we put in a few fast kilometres around the land we were on. We would fly high and fast and even though we would be in cloud, the computer would still get the coordinates and do the mapping. The computer readings could be evaluated afterwards. Vegetation levels would show up on the readings. The scientists wondered whether they should go along or not. Peaterr said it was up to them. If we did see something of interest we might be able to land and check it out, otherwise they would just be sitting in the plane the whole time. One scientist was thinking of going and then all of them were and then none. They said they had finished doing what they had to at that place. Peaterr suggested we fly them back to the flat land up north where they could have a better look around there over the day. We would again meet them before dark. Everything was agreed to. They would have lots to look at there and maybe find footprints. This was a scientist joke – about as good as they get. If Peaterr and I found anything worth seeing we could all visit that place tomorrow and check it out.

We took off, heading due north for our first landing point. We had no trouble finding it and landed safely. While the scientists were getting their gear out of the *Endeavour* Peaterr and I found a little stream with fresh water in it. It tasted sweet. We filled the water bottles and the fuel tanks for the flight. When we had finished doing this and were about to head off, Peaterr asked the scientists if they had taken enough food for themselves to eat that day. Although they had all the scientific instruments and things they wanted, they had completely forgotten to take some food. Peaterr organised food and water for us as well so it was in easy reach during our flight.

We took to the air once more, this time just Peaterr and myself. Peaterr flew due west. His idea was to travel across the country to the west coast and then either go

north or south to get an idea of the extent of this land. We climbed to an altitude of 8,000 metres and a speed of 1,500kph (airspeed). My job was to keep an eye on computer readings. The important one was the height of the ground a few miles ahead of us. We weren't expecting mountains as high as 8,000 metres but wouldn't be surprised at what we might find. Peaterr said he'd give me a chance to do some flying that day but for a while there wouldn't be much work to do. Once the *Endeavour* was trimmed and had reached altitude and speed, Peaterr sat back. I kept my eye on the computer. Peaterr was watching the instruments, of course.

After an hour and a half I announced we were coming up on a coastline. Peaterr throttled back and commenced a descent. At last we came out under the cloud and could see more coastline and beach. This time the coast ran south east by north west and not due north / south like the eastern coast. We didn't know if we had crossed the middle of the country or were closer to the top or bottom of it. Peaterr decided to turn south this time. He gave me the controls and I turned to the south east to follow the coastline. We wanted to see a bit of the coast and seeing as we shouldn't hit any mountains if we remained a little over water, we could keep to 1,000 metres altitude. Peaterr would watch for anything unusual in front of us as we flew along. At 1,000 metres and seeing the water and land clearly I took the 'Endeavour up to 1,500kph once more. After trimming I was able to take my hands off the controls and the *Endeavour* was more or less flying itself. It had been great fun to fly her even for a short time. We cruised down the coast at speed.

Peaterr said he was worried we wouldn't find a better place to set up our city than the one the scientists were at. He hoped that the computers would come up with something better. I asked if the settlement had to be near the sea. He said that in the 'olden days', as he called them, the coast was important for sea travel and it was essential to build on a harbour, but with air travel we could set up anywhere there was water and a suitable place to grow food. So the coastline wasn't as important as it had been.

We were travelling down the coast just to get an impression of the size of this block of land. We flew for three hours, so we had come south about 4,500 kilometres without reaching the end of land. Peaterr decided we should take the *Endeavour* down. He said I could do that – not land her but get close to the coast. So I took the controls and throttled back letting the craft descend slowly as we went. Before long we were about 500 metres above the coast and the *Endeavour* was being buffeted about by wind gusts. This was the first sign of wind we had experienced. I looked at the outside air temperature and found it reading 5 degrees. This was a bit different from the 25 degree day temperatures we had experienced up north.

Instead of landing in the rain and wind and cold, we decided to eat while in the air. Peaterr plotted a course that would take us directly back to the scientists and still being in control of the *Endeavour* I took her up to 10,000 metres this time and turned onto the heading we needed. I pushed the throttle forward until we were doing 2,000kph and we remained at that speed and altitude while we both watched the terrain on the computer. After about an hour Peaterr had fallen asleep. I had to make sure I kept awake. It was reassuring in some ways that he trusted me to be in control enough to fall asleep. After another hour we were almost there. Peaterr was now awake and watching for unusual ground features. There had been a few large mountains underneath us at times.

It wasn't long and we were landing at the scientists' camp. All we could tell them about our day trip was that the further south we travelled, the colder and more windy it became – which was to be expected. And that this was a big country because we hadn't yet seen the end of it down south. One of the scientists said that in the tropics where we were, there wouldn't be much wind. He had been a bit concerned that without the moon and tides the oceans might become stagnant. But then said the planet was turning faster on its axis than the Earth which meant strong winds towards the poles. This would cause sea currents that would stir up the water, so there wouldn't be anything to worry about. There were a lot of things we didn't really know about *NE*.

While we were away the scientists had been tasting nearly everything around. They had ventured into the forest and tried different fruits they had found. Some of them were like the Earth's wild berries and tasted nice; other things were not so nice. This was a start. While Peaterr and I set up camp for the night with the remaining daylight available to us, two of the scientists went over the computer readings we had taken.

Just before dinner of powdered something that was really nutritious (but not that appetising), one of the scientists discovered a large area of land due west that appeared to be clear. He didn't know whether that meant a good place for a settlement or a barren wasteland, but it was something to think about. After dark Peaterr and I were just chatting about our flight and what we might do tomorrow, when another discovery was made on the computer. This time no one wanted to guess what it meant. There appeared to be an area about 1,000 kilometres south west of the other cleared area that had vegetation in perfect rows as if they had been planted. Who had planted them? Then they discovered more clearings and what looked like animal life. All this was speculation because it was hard to evaluate with the eye. Other tests would be needed.

The *Investigator* would be almost overhead at this time, so before going to bed Peaterr sent a message off to the captain attaching all the computer information we had gathered that day. He asked them to relay to the advance party that we would be investigating a clearing tomorrow that might be suitable for a permanent settlement. He didn't mention anything about the other things the scientist had seen. He wanted them to pick these up and make comments of their own. People aboard the *Investigator* would be working on the reading tomorrow. Peaterr asked for maps if possible.

When we woke next morning there was a message for Peaterr and attached to it maps of all the places we had passed over yesterday. The message said we had discovered animal life in many parts of the country and if the cleared area we would be looking at today was suitable for a settlement, to keep an eye out for some large and smaller animals. They had picked up some about 50 kilometres to the west of that area. No other details were given. I thought, at last something interesting! And I was beginning to think this country was boring. After breakfast we packed everything and took off. The scientists were not happy about me wanting to fly so Peaterr had to do this while they were on board. No hard feelings!

I did the navigating which was good practice for me. I could use the navigation computer to pinpoint exactly where we were. I also wrote some notes in the log. We travelled at relatively low speed so we could take a look around on our way. There

was some really rough terrain with mountains sharper than I had ever seen on Earth. It looked as though the further we came in from the coast the higher and sharper the mountains were. I let Peaterr and the scientist know that we were only 10 minutes away from the clearing and the scientists looked intently out of the window. In 10 minutes we were over the clearing. It was between two mountain ranges by the look of it. It had a number of small rivers, though they looked more like creeks to the scientists. The grass looked similar to that of the area near the coast. I was looking out for animals but didn't see any. This land reminded me of the land around the Snowy Mountains in Australia and pictures I'd seen of Scotland. From this distance you might think it was cold down there but we knew differently. We knew it would be 25 degrees during the day and about 20 degrees during the night.

Peaterr looked for some hard ground to put down on. We would have about 6 hours to spend looking around the place today if my calculations were correct. Peaterr found an area not far away from the foothills to the west. He thought it wouldn't serve much purpose to land in the middle of the plain because we could already see what that was like. We wouldn't see what the vegetation and hills were like if we landed in the middle. The landing was very gentle, even though the soil was soft. Straight away the scientists liked the feel of the place. They said the soil would be excellent for growing vegetables. One of them started clearing and planting carrots straight off. I went down to one of the creeks that were scattered throughout the plain. Peaterr and I collected water for the *Endeavour* when I announced it to be sweet tasting and fresh. It was just starting to drizzle when we got back to the craft. We put on our plastic coats and I headed off to follow one of the creeks. Peaterr said he would do some maintenance on the *Endeavour* and while one of the scientists was planting, the other two were just about out of sight in the foothills.

It was a great place to be and much better than the other flat area we had discovered. This was a big expanse and the ground was not swampy but solid. We could build here I thought and the views of the mountains and streams were all around. Everyone would have a great view from their house.

Chapter 13 That's settled then, we'll take it!

Even though it was drizzling, none of the scientists came back to get a coat. They were intent on investigating. So was I. As I walked along one of the creeks, one ranging from 3 to 5 metres wide, I thought about what one of the scientists had said about looking with a different eye. If I was looking for earthly animals and fish I might miss seeing an *NE* animal or fish. I sat down on the edge of the stream and looked into it. After about 10 minutes I began to see movement in the water that didn't appear to be caused by the current. Then I saw shapes. The light occasionally hit the side of what did look like a fish. There were fish in these streams; well-camouflaged fish, even harder to see than the worms the scientists had seen, even though they were big and juicy looking. I wondered how I would catch *NE* fish. Were they like earthly fish caught with bate and hook? What did they eat? Was I imagining things? I closed my eyes and opened them again. They were still there, facing the light current of the stream and moving only slightly to keep their position. They reminded me of large trout but fatter. I think they would be grey or green on top and probably light green along their sides. They fitted into the environment very well.

I was thinking of going back to Peaterr and shouting out to the scientists that I had found fish, but this might have had the same effect as the footprint the other day. I had to try and at least catch one of these, but how? I didn't have a fishing line on me although there were some in the *Endeavour*. But how could I go back and get one without showing my excitement? I took off my boots and put my foot in the cool stream. We hadn't expected it to be cool after the water at the beach but it was cool and refreshing. Peaterr and I had noticed this when collecting it earlier. I was in the water almost up to my knees. The fish moved away from where I was standing, but were only about 60 centimetres from me. I thought what I was about to do was so stupid, but I had to give it a go. I put my hands under the water and about 30 centimetres from the fish closest to me. Then slowly put my hand under it and lifted it slightly. I was expecting the fish to move and for me to fall into the water headfirst but instead, I had hold of the fish in both hands. Both hands under it I lifted it clean out of the water.

Just like an earthly fish it started to struggle and fight when taken out of the water. I quickly propelled it behind me so it landed on the edge of the stream and didn't drop back into the water. My reflexes were better than I thought. How could anyone catch a fish that way? There it was, flapping its tail and with its mouth gasping for air. This was a fat and heavy fish and without it struggling, it would have been invisible in the green grass. Its colour seemed to take on that of its surroundings. How many other things hadn't we seen here? How many were even better camouflaged than this fish? Now I had something to show everyone. I got up on the bank and shaking with excitement put my boots back on. I stood up and picked up my fish, which was now still, and carried it back to the *Endeavour*. Peaterr was lying on the ground lifted up by his elbows and looking around as I walked to him. He saw me and didn't say a thing. He could see what I had in my hands. I put it down beside him. "The first catch on *NE*." I told him.

"How did you do it?" He asked.

"I just caught it with my bare hands." I replied.

"You sure you didn't just find it like this? It looks pretty dead."

And just as he spoke the fish moved, I think for its last time. This made Peaterr jump.

He said, "I wonder what *NE* fish taste like? Let's see?"

The stove was out and everything else we needed to cook this fish. While Peaterr got the pan ready with some oil I put the fish on a plate and with knife poised to fillet it I just stood looking at it.

"What are you doing?" asked Peaterr. "Give it here!"

I couldn't bring myself to cut this fish up, not that I had ever filleted a fish before anyway. Peaterr put the knife into the flesh behind the fish's head and cut along it. A perfectly white fleshy fillet came off in his hand. He turned the fish over and did the same to the other side. But what was left was very different from an earthly fish. What was left besides the head was a curved rubbery structure, the shape of a cuttlefish shell. It looked like cartilage: like that of a shark. I had a good look at it, or through it, because in the light you could see through it, at all the insides of the fish. These fillets were perfect with no bones in them. Another thing about these fish was their skin pulled off quite easily and mostly in one piece. How perfect, no bones and no scales to contend with, just a neat package of insides, inside a cartilage covering.

Peaterr had the fish cooked in the time it took me to look at its remains. He handed me a plate with one of the fillets and a fork. We sat down to feast. The flesh of the fish was a perfect texture and tasted clean and sweet like the water it had been in. It was quite a meal. Between us, I think we ate at least a kilogram. Peaterr couldn't believe its taste nor could I. But after having it I wondered whether we should have both eaten it. What if it had been harmful? We could have both died and the scientists would have been left to their own devices out here in the wilderness and not able to get back to civilisation. Anyway, after eating it I felt great and so did Peaterr. We had a full stomach from some real food, much tastier than our powdered meals.

After about 10 minutes of talking about how good the fish was and that we hadn't had any ill effects from it, we realised what a silly thing we had done. We had wondered whether it was all right to eat the plants, which were less likely to cause trouble than a new type of fish and yet we ignored our own warnings. We had been so hungry for real food. What would we tell the scientists?

About half an hour after we had eaten they showed up. On the way, the two scientists who had walked into the distance had brought back the third one who had been planting carrots. They announced they were very hungry after their adventures of drawing and classifying new vegetation. They had tasted some of the nicest greens they had ever had. As they were telling us, one of them noticed the remains of the fish.

"What is this?" He asked surprised.

"Just a fish, Kaavan caught and that we ate while you were away."

The three of them stared in amazement. I asked them if they wanted me to catch a couple for them to eat. They poked at the remains and looked at it in the light and dissected every part of it with a sharp knife. They didn't answer me for about 5 minutes.

Then one said, "And you ate one of these fish?"

"Well yes we did," said Peaterr. "Kaavan brought it along and we were so hungry that we didn't think about the consequences. But please don't go on about this being a silly thing to do. We both realise that now and you would be wasting your time."

“How are you both feeling?” Another said, showing concern.

I said, “Fine. Do you want me to catch a couple for you?”

“Yes please, so we can conduct some stringent tests before even considering eating any of it. How did it taste?”

“Great,” I replied.

“I really hope they are fit to eat. I’m so hungry I could eat a horse,” said one of them.

I spent the remainder of daylight hours catching three of the fish’s mates. They were a bit harder for me to get this time, but a lot easier than they would have been on Earth. The scientists were with me on the bank of the stream. This probably made it a little harder for me to concentrate. But they carried out their tests and had their meal and were full before they carried on their work of dissecting the remaining fish and drawing what they saw. They liked to draw things because it gave them the impression of what they saw and not just its look. They also took photographs, which were down loaded onto the computer for everyone to see later.

Peaterr called the *Investigator* with our news. They told him they hadn’t been able to get through to the advance party the night before, but would pass on our findings to them. He said we would remain where we were and hoped they were in a position to come over to the clearing tomorrow. The *Investigator* would send them a map.

The next day we remained on the plain waiting for some news from the advance party. Peaterr had us mark out a landing place for the *Tom Thumb*. Of course, this craft only needed enough area to put down on. Just after daybreak Peaterr and I walked about 3 kilometres to the centre of the plain where we placed some luminous markers to show the captain of the *Tom Thumb* where to land. The centre of the plain would be the best place to start the settlement because it gave plenty of room to spread out from. Flying over the plain the day before we could see the whole area had rich soil and a good source of water. It was 10 kilometres at the longest point and 5 kilometres at the widest point. It was almost a rectangle, flanked on two sides by mountain ranges running north / south. If anything should come onto this land the settlement would see it in plenty of time to react. It didn’t look like anything would be able to come over from the east or west but could from the north and south. In some ways it was good to know that the animals spotted by the computer were west of here.

After setting the markers for the *Tom Thumb* we walked back to the *Endeavour*. We were having some breakfast with the scientists when we heard a strange squawking noise from the western mountains. It was an eerie sound, like the shouting of cockatoos but 10 times louder. It then occurred to me that this was a big thing missing on this land, birds that is – we hadn’t seen any in all the time we had been here. We all stared towards the mountains but could see nothing. After a short while the noise was almost deafening and coming closer to us. Still staring at the mountains, we all saw flashes of something across the rock. There was something in the air but they were invisible to us, that is, until they flew down towards the green grass. To me the noise level was quite frightening, but we didn’t really have much time to think about it before giant birds began landing along the streams to drink. They looked like large cockatoos but 4 or 5 times the size. There were hundreds of them landing now, turning the banks of the streams white. They had been perfectly camouflaged against the misty white sky, but against the green of the plain grasses they stood out like

billiard balls on a pool table. They were so big and fat and noisy. Even though none of them was close to us they would have been about half the size of a person.

After watching them for half an hour, they took to the air again and screeched their way back towards the mountains until we no longer saw or heard from them. The scientists agreed this would be something the new settlers would have to get used to every morning. Obviously this was a good place for birds to have an early morning drink.

We spent the remainder of the morning looking around further. The scientists discovered a small animal about the size of a rat but thinner, which lived in the grasses near the streams. Like all the animals so far, they were difficult to see in their own environment because they were the same colour as the grass. It was only through the slightest movement that the scientists could detect them. The best way to see the animals on this planet is to sit and observe anything unusual, a movement, a colour change, a noise, but it was very difficult. The scientists set up a trap for one of these creatures.

I sat on the bank of a stream and tried to train my eyes to see new things. After a while I noticed a slight change in the grass, instead of just leaves there were small flowers appearing, the same colour as the leaves but a different shape, of course. At lunchtime we compared notes with each other on what we had discovered. Peaterr at the edge of the plain in a wooded area, had caught a glimpse of an animal about the size of a dog. It was dark and only left a shadow as it walked through the timber. He said at no time had it wandered onto the plain. The scientists discovered about 10 different types and sizes of small creatures like the green one they had seen earlier. I told them about the grass flowers and how I had to sit and look really hard to observe them. They said that the whole place, which looked devoid of animals yesterday, was really teeming with life. After lunch the scientists visited their little trap they had set up but nothing was inside it.

Peaterr decided to stay with the *Endeavour*, keeping a listening watch on the radio for any news of the *Investigator* or the *Tom Thumb*. I caught some fish for tea and was filleting them when a call came announcing that the *Tom Thumb*, after its occupants had spent the morning packing, was on its way to the plain. This was good news. We would have more people to talk to soon. They had just taken off and were able to get through to us on the radio now they had some altitude. We packed our things into the *Endeavour* because it would be best if we were closer to the *Tom Thumb* when it landed. While in the air we circled the whole plain once again and then made a wider circle to have a good look at our surroundings further afield.

The southern end of the plain was wider than the northern end and although the streams came from the east and west mountain ranges, they all turned and headed in a northerly direction. There must be a slight down hill slope from south to north. The northern end of the plain was very swampy because the streams came together in a few places before going through a narrow opening. I guess if anything was to get into the plain it would have to do it from the south where it was more open and the ground harder. The mountain ranges on both sides were at least 5 kilometres wide and the sharpness of the peaks would prevent most animals that we have on Earth getting over them in a hurry. I don't know why I was thinking about an invasion, but the thought of large animals not too far away had me worried.

Peaterr took the *Endeavour* over to the west to look for the animals that the *Investigator* team had picked up from our computers. We could see nothing but trees in that direction. After spreading the wings of the *Endeavour*, Peaterr put the craft down in the middle of the plain not far from the markings we had made that morning.

We had an early dinner and waited for the *Tom Thumb*. The scientists and I had collected fish for every-ones' dinner. We saw the craft fly over the hills from the east. It was great to see it appear and put down between the markers. We hurried out to see our visitors. There was a lot of shaking hands and discussion going on. There were no children in the advance party, which was mainly made up of men and a few women. Their work would now concentrate on planning how best to set up buildings. They would need to set put a few more permanent ones before the others aboard the *Investigator* started coming to the surface of the planet. These buildings would serve the team here and serve as recreational or community centres later on. But first we cooked up some fish for all, except a couple who were vegetarian. Everyone who had fish thought it was the best tasting they had ever had. This might have been true or it might have been because they had been living on powder for what seemed like a long time.

Most people talked till late at night. Next morning everyone was up and doing the job they had come to do. I watched while some were surveying and others unpacking the geodesic dome structures. The *Tom Thumb* was much larger than the *Endeavour*, but didn't appear to be large enough to have held all the construction gear they were getting out of it. There were masses of materials. The surveyors congratulated Peaterr and the scientists for coming up with such a good spot to settle. They were very impressed with it. They couldn't have asked for better and some said it was a far cry from what they had been used to on the island.

Peaterr now had to decide what we should do next. This was only the first part in our process, finding a place to settle. The exploring was about to start in earnest now. We remained with the advance party for a few days, giving us enough time to see one of the geodesic domes completed. These structures are made by linking, in this case, triangle shapes together to form a dome, which not only acts as a roof but goes down to the ground and can be used for anything from a house to a large community centre, depending on its size of course. In this case the dome made a large building to house all the advance party. Each triangle had a piece of 'Plasglass' (made from a combination of glass and polymer resins) inside it, so that when the structure was completed it kept the elements out. The glass was self-cleaning and would work very well on *NE* because it was always drizzling here.

We headed off very early one morning after packing supplies of fish in our freezer. This time we were going to circumnavigate the land mass. After flying due west to the coast once more we turned north west and followed the beaches. We remained low to see if we could see any forms of life we could investigate or any vegetation that might be agreeable for people to eat. The scientist who planted the carrots on the plain was very happy because before we left, leaves were shooting up through the Earth. They were taking less time to grow than they would on Earth. His only concern was that the little green animals might eat them before they were ready to be eaten by the advance party. Before leaving the plain we had had a naming ceremony. It was officially called *Pleasant* because so many people, after seeing it, had said, 'This is pleasant'. So *Pleasant* it was. I thought it was good not to name the

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first settlement after a person. It was much better to tell people aboard the *Investigator* they would be coming to a place called *Pleasant*. The name carried good vibes. On take-off we circled *Pleasant* as we always did before fixing a heading. I looked down on the dome, which had the world flag on its mast. This place was beginning to look, as well as, feel more like home, except the flag was just hanging down. I wondered if it would ever fly properly here because there was very little wind to speak of. People might never actually get to see the world flag with its blue and white Earth in the centre of a darker blue sky.

We travelled along what appeared to be endless coast for about a thousand kilometres, then it changed direction to the northeast. Peaterr changed course to follow it and remained below cloud so we could observe the coast first hand. We were flying at around 1,000kph and had been in the air for about an hour and a half. After another half an hour we were turning east and it looked like we had reached the top of the land mass. The advance party couldn't complain about being on a small island now. This was a huge chunk of land.

Chapter 14 City limits

We hadn't heard from the scientists for a while and I thought they had fallen asleep so I turned around and saw them staring glazed eyed at the land below. Peaterr told them I was going to take over the flying for a while. They mumbled about it so Peaterr said.

“What if something happens to me? How will you get back to *Pleasant*? I want Kaavan to keep his hours up so he will be safe to fly. So as captain I am overruling anything you have to say on the matter.”

After a few seconds the mumbling stopped and Peaterr handed the controls over to me. We flew on for another 15 minutes without seeing anything unusual, and then on the horizon I could see a difference in the land formation. The sandy beaches were still there but further inland was a flat area, not the usual timbered area leading up to mountains. Peaterr said for me to throttle back. I washed off speed until we were flying at 100kph. Even at this distance we could see trees that had been planted at regular intervals. There were even larger areas planted with crops unfamiliar to us. There were acres and acres of these in the distance and as we approached we saw what looked like farm machinery and people. I rubbed my eyes but it didn't erase the picture.

One of the scientists said, “That looks like an orchard down there”.

We flew over the top of a farmhouse at the height of 200 metres.

People were working in the fields and I could see them waving to us. Further on there was a clearing. Peaterr tried getting in touch with the *Endeavour* but without success, so he tried the *Tom Thumb* and only receives static in return. I made the craft climb to 8,000 metres and Peaterr tried the *Tom Thumb* once more. He received an answer this time. Giving our position he told them what we were seeing and that we were going to investigate further. I washed off height until we were again below the cloud and flying across an enormous expanse of farmland. Peaterr said for me to find where the ‘people’ were waving and to put down near them. We were over the clearing now and ‘people’ were looking up at us as I put the craft down. This was the first time I had landed the *Endeavour*. I probably came in a bit fast and used up more of the field than Peaterr would have liked but we were down and safely. I felt good about such a smooth landing and the scientists, not knowing the critical points Peaterr knew about landing, thought it was a good one. In fact, one of them tapped me on the shoulder as I was getting out of the craft and said, “Well done!”

We all got out of the *Endeavour* and waited for something or someone to show up, and before long we could see a tractor coming towards us. It didn't make any noise so I had no idea how it was being propelled. It was towing a flat-bed trailer and on it there was just one person, the driver, sitting up front.

As he stopped close to us he said, “Good morning, gentlemen,” extending his hand to one of the scientists who shook it.

The man, and I say man because that was what he looked like, remained on the tractor. We were dumbfounded when he spoke because it was in English.

“My name is James and I am very pleased to meet you all.”

He then stepped off the tractor and shook hands with all of us and as he did he said our names. I was astounded that he knew our names but glad I didn't have to do any introductions because I straightaway felt embarrassed that I didn't know the

names of the scientists. I actually felt ashamed I hadn't learned their names before this. But this man knew us.

"Come up to the house!" he said. "Leave everything. We'll walk so your legs have some exercise after being cooped up in that craft for so long."

Apart from saying hello to him we just did as he said and walked along till we came to a slight rise and walked up to his house. It was a house similar to farmhouses in Australia or other parts of the world for that matter. We were introduced to a lady who even we could work out was James' wife and sat down to a warm drink that was very nice. We were given some delicious food to eat, which resembled cakes. I couldn't describe the taste to you because of their uniqueness but they tasted something like tropical fruitcakes. Both the man and his wife had grey hair and looked to be old, like 50 years of age. They sat with us and asked where we came from and where we were going. Peaterr bumbled along with some of our story and when there was a break I said a few words and so did the scientists. They both said they were very pleased to have us with them. Peaterr couldn't help himself and asked what we all wanted to know,

"How do you know our names?"

James replied, "We know something of you through your communications and I know you would like to learn more about us. I will answer anything you ask and it will always be the truth and you will always get the truth from anyone else you find here in this part of AZ. Sorry Kaavan, the name of our planet isn't *NE*, but *AZ*. (pronounced Az). We would be very happy for you to stay with us for as long as you like."

I wondered if he could be the 'Wizard of AZ'. I wasn't game to say anything and was even afraid of thinking it because he might have been able to read minds. Peaterr told them there were others south of there and they nodded their heads. They already knew this because they had somehow monitored our radio calls. They also knew how many of us were aboard the *Investigator*.

James continued, "How about spending the rest of the day looking around and talking to people and getting to know more about this part of AZ? This evening after dinner we will talk again. Feel free to wander anywhere you please."

My first wander was to their bathroom.

During the afternoon we stuck together and walked amongst the fruit trees. Every tree was perfect and so was its fruit. Some people were picking and packing fruit into containers. We walked up to a nice looking girl about 20 years old. Peaterr introduced himself and the rest of us to her. She gave us her welcome and asked if we wanted a piece of fruit to eat. She handed each one of us something resembling a plum. It tasted a little like a plum and a little like an apple with a bit of banana thrown in. She said she would see us at dinnertime. I asked her how she knew English so well and she said she didn't understand my question. She only knew what she spoke was language and said everyone could understand that.

As we walked on, one of the scientists, John is his name, said that maybe what we were hearing and seeing was what we wanted to hear and see. Her language might actually be very different from ours but we could still understand her. He explained that one person might see the colour green as green but another as red. It didn't matter what the colour was as long as it was called by the same name. Of course John explained it a lot better than me but I hope you get my meaning. Think about it.

What happened to the theory that we might not be able to see animals on this planet? These animals were definitely looking like people and that was fine with me. I didn't want to meet up with ugly looking creatures on AZ. What was really great was we could talk to them and understand them so well.

At dinner, we sat with the whole family. There were James and his wife, and their three sons and one daughter. The daughter was the girl we met earlier in the orchard. Before we started to eat, one of the sons said a prayer. That is, I think it was a prayer. I couldn't make out his words. Then we started eating what to us was a feast. There were lots of different hot dishes, all kinds of vegetables and loads of bread. I thought how the vegetarians from Earth would love this place. Later there were cakes and fruit to eat. It all tasted so good. At the end of the meal I had definitely had enough to eat but didn't feel overly full. We all felt good with this food inside us. I mentioned to James how good the fish tasted to us and that we had some in the *Endeavour* we should eat soon before they went off.

James said to me, "Tomorrow, I'd like you to do something. Take the fish and put them in a stream near here. I'll tell you which one in the morning. And Peaterr, would you invite your friends over from *Pleasant*. They would be very welcome as our guests here. We would also like some of your people on the *Investigator* to come and stay as well. It will save you building your structures and doing other unnecessary things. Everything you need is right here with us."

Peaterr said he would think about this and thanked him for his hospitality. I asked James if catching fish was the wrong thing to do. He said it wasn't wrong for us to catch fish. He said that our situation had now changed and there was no longer any need to eat fish. The food they would supply us with would satisfy our hunger better than animal flesh. The most interesting thing James said to us was, when the *Investigator* people came down to AZ we would need to exclude a few and that they would have to stay on the *Investigator*. Peaterr thought this was because James would be unable to accommodate all of us and said it wasn't a problem because there would have to be a skeleton crew remaining with the Captain, in any case. James explained it wasn't a matter of numbers but that certain people would not be welcome. He began listing them by name and ended by handing Peaterr a written list with close to 150 names on it.

Whoever had written the list had lovely handwriting. What a strange request to excluded some of us from AZ. All Peaterr could say was he would do his best. However, we could all see how serious James was on this point. It almost appeared to be a warning to us. Peaterr questioned James further and it seems that James had intercepted certain communications from the *Investigator*, which had given him the impression that a few people aboard would not be comfortable living in this part of AZ. So he left it at that.

James finished up by saying, "It will all go well with you if you do as I ask."

That night I slept soundly, along with everyone else, in a nice bed with a mattress. It was so peaceful here. If the other place was *Pleasant* this place was *Peaceful*.

When I said this to James next morning he replied, "It is called *Delight*." Everyone was so nice to talk to and so interested in what I had to say. No one ignored us. Occasionally we were put straight about things but in a nice way. Everyone we saw in the orchard seemed to know who we were.

If I started off saying to someone, “Hello, my name is Kaavan and . . .”, before I could continue they would say.

“Welcome Kaavan and I know who you are. I am pleased to meet you.”

How did they automatically know about us?

Peaterr, James and I were walking together the next morning when Peaterr said we should take the *Endeavour* up to about 8,000 metres to get in touch with the advance party and tell them what was happening. James invited Peaterr to use the communication channel in the house if he wished. He could even contact the *Investigator* from there. He said it would be good to invite everyone to come and visit, with the exception of the people on the list. Peaterr was sure he wouldn't be able to contact anyone from the ground, but became convinced he could when he heard the communications officer's voice aboard the *Tom Thumb* coming through as clear as a bell.

This was also the case with the *Investigator*. I could hear Peaterr explaining things to them hesitatingly, expecting them to say, “How much have you had to drink, Peaterr?” But instead they listened to what he had to say and agreed to everything straight off. The advance team would pack things now and be over that very afternoon. The captain aboard the *Investigator* listened to Peaterr reading out the list of people not to send along. He agreed to the request and said the shuttle would commence bringing people the next day. Later on Peaterr said he couldn't believe how easy it had been to tell people what they should do. James heard him and said, “When people hear what is right, they know it inside.”

My next job was to put the fish we had on board the *Endeavour* into the stream that James picked out for me. I did this on my own. They were frozen as I put them into the water and they disappeared before my eyes. I didn't see any of them floating to the surface. I had another look around the farm and watched while one guy picked up a giant load of fruit in a container and put it onto the flat bed tray. Women were doing the same thing. These containers weighed at least 100 kilograms. Everything was happening like clockwork, but even so, you could interrupt them as they worked and they would stop and talk to you. And when you had finished talking they would go back to their work.

After lunch, consisting of more beautiful vegetables, fruit and bread, we chatted to James. We wanted to know so many things. Peaterr asked him where approximately 1,350 people would live when they arrived. He said they would live in houses just like his, the one we were in. He said for us to fly around and have a look. Peaterr, the scientists and I took to the air and to the east of James' farm we saw farmhouse after farmhouse with fruit trees surrounding them. I counted close to 600. We landed near one and went up to the verandah. Peaterr opened the door and we looked around inside. This one had four bedrooms and everything a large family would need. There were no locks on any door or window. There were no fences around properties. I thought this is far better than *Pleasant*: it is *Perfect*.

When we returned James said to us, “Did you have a good look around *Near Perfect*?”

How could he have known what I had named it? He then said I didn't quite understand what he was saying. The place could only be called *Near Perfect* because it wasn't *Perfect*. He said it was really a rather pale image of perfection. One day we

would know what *Perfect* was. I wanted to ask him more about his but the *Tom Thumb* was arriving.

James said, "We can talk more about this later. Go and see your friends now. They will land over near *Near Perfect*. I will be over soon to welcome them. Also while you are there, pick a suitable place for your families to live."

We walked to the *Endeavour* and took to the sky for a very short trip and landed near the *Tom Thumb*. People were taking things from the craft and walking to their new houses. How did they know what to do and where to go? We met up with one of the guys standing on a verandah looking over his orchard.

"How do you pick these places, Peaterr? You are a genius."

He invited us in and showed us where his family would live when they arrived from the *Investigator* during the next few days. The five of us walked on and we could somehow tell where we should go. I saw a house that I liked the look of. I walked up to it and the others headed off in a different direction. I walked through the unlocked door and there inside were three bedrooms perfect for my family and it was fitted out with everything we needed. There was food on the bench in the kitchen, so I ate some of it. It was very nice. I then walked outside and sat on the verandah looking across the rows of trees. Maybe this was the kind of thing the navigation computer had picked up a few days ago, but it couldn't be the same, because this place was much further north.

Sitting on a bench on the verandah I fell asleep. I woke up feeling refreshed and found I still wasn't dreaming. It was real. This would be my family's home for a while and I loved it. There were no flies or ants that I could see. I looked for Peaterr who I found in his house. He was speaking to someone aboard the *Investigator* on a radio he had in his place. A little girl had fallen and hit her head and died. I had a sinking feeling it was Sue, but Peaterr quickly said it wasn't. The girl was only little. They would bring her down on the first shuttle tomorrow and we would bury her here. Peaterr said it would be a nice place to be buried and then said it was a strange thing for him to say, but I was thinking the same thing. How could anywhere be a good place for a young person to be buried?

The next morning the shuttle landed. It was an enormous craft compared to the *Tom Thumb* and *Endeavour*. It landed just to the east of our new settlement and people started walking towards *Near Perfect*. One man was travelling slowly carrying something in his arms. I could see James coming to meet him and I walked towards them both. James smiled to the man and put out his hand to him. He had trouble shaking it because he was carrying the little girl in his arms. James put his arms out to the man and he gave him the little girl. This was the little dead girl. As soon as he took her in his arms he turned and the girl began moving. She was wriggling so much he put her down and she immediately ran towards the houses. The man, presumably her father, who had been bent over while carrying the girl, stood up straight. He put his arms around James. After this they walked together to the man's new house. Everyone was happy here. I had never seen so many people so happy. I suppose the most unusual thing about the incident with the little girl was that no one thought it too extraordinary for *Near Perfect*. You almost expected this kind of thing to happen.

Over the next week all the people who were allowed to come to AZ and on to *Near Perfect* had arrived. My family was on board the fourth trip of the shuttle so I only had to wait a day. When they arrived I ran out to them and I couldn't stop

rambling on about the place and what I had seen. Mum told me how one of the little girls she had been looking after had died and I told her not to worry she was running around somewhere. Mum said I must have misunderstood what she said but then caught sight of the little girl herself. She was stunned to see her alive and well, so was Dad. Sue couldn't keep her eyes off me and followed me around like a little puppy for the rest of the day. I was glad she did.

It was so great to see everyone again. It wasn't long before Keethe and Berte were sitting on our verandah with me and talking about all sorts of things. This was definitely the life. We had work to do, but it was good work. Do you know what I mean? If you had to collect fruit you would take a container and pick some. No one had to work hard because there was no watering or weeding needed. We didn't even have to prune the trees. If we wanted a longer walk we could go and collect grain to make flour and cereal or better still, cakes. We just collected and ate. But the best thing was we had time to talk and share meals with other people. We were genuinely having a good time.

James gradually got around to all the houses and answered the many questions people had. I found there were less and less things to ask him now because most of my questions dissolved after thinking them through. Most questions belonged to an earthly way of thinking, things like what happens if? I once asked James what would happen if a big wind came up and destroyed our trees?

He simply replied, "A big wind wouldn't come up and destroy our trees."

I asked him, "Do people die here and what happens to them?"

He answered, "People do die here, but because they truly understand they just move on to a perfect place."

He described death as a continuation of life and not an end to it.

I remember James asking Dad what he thought the purpose of life was? This was a good question, but all Dad could do was shrug his shoulders.

James said, "This is something you need to find out. You need to know why you live and what you should be doing with your life. In the meantime you are welcome to stay as long as you like here."

I must admit I didn't understand what James was getting at, but we were all definitely thankful for being in *Near Perfect*. We had all we needed to live and to be happy. People didn't even think about doing the wrong thing. Taking something from someone else would be really dumb because whatever you took you already had. People were very open about what they said. I didn't hear anyone say anything nasty about anyone else. I couldn't imagine a more perfect place if I tried. However, James said there was a better place. I don't remember arguing with Keethe or Berte and I didn't even mind Sue hanging around. She was no longer a nuisance to me. We did a lot of talking, eating, walking and visiting in *Near Perfect*. As for food, it couldn't be beaten. We got to know each other really well. We met people from the *Investigator* who we had never spoken to before, even though they had lived just down the corridor from us. Our attitude towards life was different. I made new friends and so did Dad, Mum and Sue. We'd have them over for dinner and talk. Keethe and Berte were not jealous of my new friends and I wasn't jealous of theirs. In fact, we all got on well together.

During this time I found out a lot more about Peaterr. He had a wife and son I knew nothing about. It made me feel bad I had never asked him things like that

before. He no longer saw either of them and of course at the moment there was no way of even getting in touch with them. One day Keethe, Berte, Sue and Sue's friend, Paulla, and I were sitting on Peaterr's verandah drinking a fruit juice, of course, and Peaterr became rather sad. It didn't matter to anyone now who you told things to because you could trust them to do the right thing. Even younger people like me had a good understanding of other people's feelings, so did Sue for that matter. I think we knew what was bothering Peaterr but he confirmed it when he said,

"I would give anything to have Racchel and Steaven with me right now. For them to be sitting with us here looking over this great view of trees and streams and for them to get to know all of you. That for me would be perfect."

What could any of us say, here we didn't need to say anything. There was true empathy. Empathy is a word that is only half-understood on Earth.

On Earth we might say, "Yes, I understand."

But we wouldn't really understand what others were feeling and going through. Here in *Near Perfect* we could put ourselves into the other person's shoes. This really helped. Peaterr said to us, after a silence, how great it was to have others truly understand what he was feeling, to share the rough times with the good.

One day I asked Peaterr what I thought might be a silly question (but here at *Near Perfect* it is okay to ask silly questions), people understand and even have some of their own to ask. The important difference is that here you don't feel embarrassed to ask them. I asked Peaterr when we would be heading off to map the rest of this land and other places on the planet. He said there was no longer any need to do this work. He had all the information on all parts of the planet at his fingertips. I hadn't bothered reading the books around our place, which were on mini disks and would fit my electronic reader. I thought it interesting that all the things we had planned to do now seemed a waste of time. Peaterr could even keep in touch with the *Investigator* from his house, a more reliable system than the *Endeavour's* radio.

It was hard to fathom why, but after a few months of near perfect living some people were becoming restless. They had studied books and were questioning James about other places they had heard were on *AZ*. James always told the truth and was truly reliable. He, his family and anyone else living at *Delight* thought more of the other person than they did of themselves and they had the other person's welfare at heart all of the time. However, after studying about a city near *Near Perfect* called, *Chance Your Luck*, and seeing something in this place familiar to places seen on Earth, some people were keen to investigate further. James stressed the dangers of this place, but emphasised anyone was at liberty to go anywhere they wanted on *AZ*. There were no restrictions but they might like to heed his warnings and the fact that *Chance Your Luck* was definitely not a nice place. As you know, people are inquisitive and like to find things out for themselves. Some even said James had been hiding this place from them. Of course this wasn't true and most could see that. If he was hiding things about *Chance Your Luck* why would he leave books around for us to read about it?

I guess it didn't really surprise me when Berte's family said they wanted to go to the city with some of the others. They were just going to check the place out for themselves that was all. They asked Peaterr to take them. Peaterr didn't like the idea one bit but didn't want to make trouble for anyone, especially for James and his

family who had been so great to all of us. So he agreed. They asked him what he wanted in return as payment.

I heard Peaterr say, "There isn't anything you have that interests me."

I understood what he meant. Their money no longer had any value for him at *Near Perfect*. The only thing that interested him was having his family back and living in a place like this with them. One person said he could actually arrange for that to happen if he took them to *Chance Your Luck*. Peaterr didn't even bother answering this remark. We all knew no one was in a position to promise that. For the past month I had thought everyone at *Near Perfect* was feeling the same way I was. I was astounded to find out that some of the people here were no longer interested in what *Near Perfect* had to offer them. I felt sad for these people.

Mum and Dad knew what was on my mind when I asked them if I could go with Peaterr on this flight. If I could, I wanted to help keep people on board the *Endeavour* and fly straight back after having a quick look at *Chance Your Luck* from the air. I could see this being more dangerous for us than anything we had been involved in so far. My folks agreed that I could go and so did Keethe's, but only because I was going. Berte would be there with his Mum and Dad who were very excited about the prospect of seeing a more exciting place. They didn't see anything wrong with going there. It would be another adventure of discovery.

When word got around that we were going to *Chance Your Luck* there were too many to fit into the *Endeavour*, so it was decided Peaterr should take the *Tom Thumb* instead. After a shuffle of gear and the addition of seats to the *Tom Thumb* it could now hold 40 people. It was decided we'd head off the next day. Notice how I keep on saying 'it was decided'? I don't know who was actually doing the deciding nowadays. There seemed to be something taking hold of these people. Everyone interested in going was saying they were just going to see what the place looked like. They all had every intention of returning to *Near Perfect*. They just wanted to satisfy their curiosity for seeing a big city on this planet and how different it might be from their own on Earth. They wondered whether life was as bustling. They said it was just a healthy interest they had in their new surroundings.

Mum and Dad weren't happy to see me leave and I wasn't that sure about things myself. Peaterr told them he definitely wasn't happy and wouldn't be staying there, but if people wanted to be dropped off he would do so. He would then return in a couple of days' time to pick up those who wanted to return to *Near Perfect*. They would have to be ready to leave straight after he landed. He certainly wouldn't be waiting around for anyone. So it was agreed. He was hoping that after flying over the place everyone would want to fly straight back with him the same day. Then he wouldn't have to worry about going back later.

Chapter 15 Some could pass on *Chance Your Luck*

Before we left, James had a talk to me about the city. He didn't paint a pretty picture of the place. He said that although it was advertised as a very pleasant place, it definitely wasn't, especially for young people. I said my intention, like everyone else's, was to fly over the place, have a look at it and come back. He said he knew I'd want to look out for my friends, which was admirable, but for me to remember that at times we cannot always have influence over them. This conversation was confusing me and I had the feeling I was going to get more confused during the trip. He said I had to remember the bottom line, which was, everyone is responsible for their own actions. He said even though my friends and I were only 13 or 14 years old this would mean nothing to the *Chance Your Luck* society. It would be only too willing to do us harm, if we entered the city. *Chance Your Luck* was not a place many people could just pass through. Now this discussion was really worrying me, because James knew what he was talking about, but I would have to learn by experience.

I tried to talk Keethe and Berte out of going but Berte said he had to go where his parents went and they would look after him. Keethe said it would be lots of fun and that I should lighten up. Maybe Keethe was right, but so far James had not been wrong and after all, he knew more about this place than anyone else. I had talked myself into going so that I could look after my friends. However, I was beginning to have doubts about my true motives. Everyone going was talking the place up.

We headed off in the *Tom Thumb*, which was a much bigger craft than I was used to. To take-off vertically was a real buzzer. I was the navigator for Peaterr of course, and he really put his foot to the floor this time because he was in a hurry to get there and back. I asked him what would happen if I stayed on for the couple of days in *Chance Your Luck*. Would this be a problem to him with navigation and everything? He said it would be my decision.

Peaterr didn't say much for the rest of the trip and I kept my eyes on the console most of the time. We were heading due south at top speed with the light disappearing behind us. We were not at cruising speed for long before we were on descent. Peaterr throttled back and we broke through the cloud. It was windy outside with the temperature reading -10 at an altitude of 100 metres. I made a radio call just in case there were other craft in the area.

I said, "*Tom Thumb* on descent to *Chance Your Luck*. Will be circling the city in 2 minutes. We may make a vertical descent soon after."

Back came the call, "Welcome *Tom Thumb*. We are very pleased to hear from you. After circling you may like to land at the north entrance to our beautiful city. All entering will be made very welcome. Good evening."

I answered, "*Tom Thumb*, good evening."

There was a glow on the horizon, and as we passed over some very sharp looking hills we could see bright lights and domes ahead. Peaterr throttled back still more until we were hovering over *Chance Your Luck*. This place had a strange effect on those on board. You were either uneasy or excited by the prospect of seeing this place. One dome was connected to another by covered walkways. People were travelling on what looked like conveyor-belts between these domes. There were bright lights all around, many of them flashing with signs for who knows what. I think they were for gambling, movies and nightclubs mainly. I could see Berte and Keethe mesmerised by

the bright lights. I was now one of the people feeling uneasy about the place. There were many entrances around the city, which seemed to stretch for miles. But everywhere looked the same. We couldn't make out what was inside the buildings but the people moving along the walkways looked happy enough. Peaterr put the *Tom Thumb* down close to the northern entrance suggested by the person on the radio. We saw other space vehicles arriving. They were all two-seater craft and there were many more in the parking lot. Men were walking from their vehicles wearing suits and arm in arm with ladies in black dresses. We looked at each other thinking how out of place we looked. Up till now what we were wearing hadn't been important to us. On landing we heard a voice over the radio.

"Again welcome *Tom Thumb*. I am glad you have decided to pay us a visit. Please feel free to come inside and look around. Please join us in a great time. Dresses and suits can be hired just inside the entrance."

We sat looking around at the expanse of the place and its bright lights.

Someone said, "I don't know about you but I'm going to give the place a try." Peaterr made an announcement that anyone leaving the *Tom Thumb* would be on their own. Those going back with him should stay on board. For the others he would return in exactly 40 hours time, for those wanting to return to *Near Perfect*. Anyone not at this place in 40 hours time would be left behind to fend for themselves. He asked if that was clear to everyone and they either said yes or nodded their head. Roughly 25 people got out of the craft. These included Berte and his family and Keethe. Keethe was one of the first to leave.

I looked at Peaterr and said, "I have to look after my friends."

Peaterr said, "Are you sure they are still your friends?"

I didn't reply and got out of the *Tom Thumb*. What was I doing?

Chance Your Luck was definitely different from what I had been used to over the past 16 or so months. I could see Berte and his family very excited as they walked towards the entrance to the city. I turned to Keethe who was looking around at the bright lights and sparkling domes of the city. He said he was really interested in seeing what the place was all about. I looked back to see *Tom Thumb* take-off and turn north. In a few seconds it was out of sight.

It was freezing cold outside, but after walking through a large door circled in flashing lights the temperature warmed up considerably. We could see many of our people up ahead. They were heading towards the suit hire place and before long we were all being fitted for suits and dresses – depending on whether you were male or female, of course. When that was finished we all looked the same. I looked very flash in my dark suit, white shirt and black tie. I wondered how we – that is, Keethe, Berte and I would make it past the bouncers at the gambling halls and other shady looking places in here. Berte was 14 and Keethe and I only 13 years old. After the fit out, which cost a mere 1000 AZ dollars each, or would have cost that much if we had the money to pay for it, we moved on. We were expected to win big at gambling so we could pay the place back for our attire. People from the suit hire place were telling everyone not to worry about a thing – we would win that much in the next 30 minutes. We'd see. Again I was very worried about the 'don't worries', especially in this place. They even gave us \$500 each to start our gambling off.

We were pushed through and the next thing I remember I was standing on a moving walkway heading towards the casino entrance. I was no longer concerned

about getting into the casino even though we were much too young to legally enter it. Passing a mirror I could see that everyone including Keethe, Berte and myself looked 25 years old and we were very good looking. You should have seen how great the girls looked here! They were stunning.

We passed through another door and were in a casino with more flashing lights and very strange sounding music. The bouncers on the door, instead of asking us for identification, bowed as we entered. Inside, the people from the *Tom Thumb* spread out so much I could only see a few of them up ahead. I was having trouble at this stage recognising Berte and Keethe because of their transformation in age, height and looks. They looked so grown up. It was fortunate I knew them well enough to recognise them by their mannerisms and actions. As we were looking around, a pretty girl offered to change our money into chips for us, so we could start gambling. We couldn't resist her smile as we handed over our money. She didn't run off like I thought she might but came back with chips and said how she had only taken the customary 10 percent for her services. She gave us another beautiful smile and we never saw her again. Ten percent was \$50 so now we only had \$450 in chips and owed the suit people \$1,500. And we hadn't actually done anything yet.

The three of us looked around at other people placing chips all over the place. Keethe and Berte were reading up on some of the rules of the games. None of us had been inside a gambling place before. They decided to stay together and do some gambling but for me it wasn't a great idea. I needed to get out of there because I couldn't stand the noise and smoke. I was beginning to feel sick. We agreed to meet back at the gambling hall entrance in two hours' time. I intended to leave the way I came in but was directed in the opposite direction by the bouncers. I walked through the gambling hall to an exit. This time I was able to leave the hall and head off on a moving walkway. There were less people on this walkway than the first because many had stayed in the gambling hall. I looked around for a familiar face but didn't recognise anyone. I was just standing on the walkway, which was moving along quite quickly, and trying to see what was outside the plastic tube that led to the next dome. Four people pushed me out of the way as they walked passed. They acted as if I wasn't a person but an inanimate object in their way. I remember thinking how different things were here from *Near Perfect*. They stared straight ahead as they rushed along; their faces could instantly change from a smile to a stern look and then back again in an instant. I was straining to see what was outside the plastic tube but it was impossible to make anything out because of the bright flashing lights inside the tube.

At the end of the walkway there was another entrance with more flashing lights that spelt out the words '20/10 Night Life'. I guess the message here was this place never closed. I thought it interesting that the number of hours in a day and days in a week coincided with what our scientists had worked out on-board the *Investigator*. I followed a guy and girl through the doorway. To the right and left were booths.

"That will be \$50 my friend," said a female voice as I came up the booth on the right.

I took out the chips I had in my pocket.

"Naughty boy, you should have cashed these in the gambling hall."

She took some of them and I was told to go through. I think I just lost another \$100 because now I only had \$350 worth of chips left.

If the gambling place was noisy it had nothing on this place. The strange discordant music that was playing in the gambling hall was playing in here but 10 times as loud. I couldn't think. Couples were sitting around almost shouting into their partners' ears to be heard above the 'music'. A girl came up to me and asked me to buy her a drink. I declined saying I didn't even know her. Her charming smile turned to an instant scowl. Her pleasant face had turned to something really nasty, almost scary. I watched while she walked over to a very large man and pointed me out to him. I quickly latched onto a group of people who looked like they were moving through the nightclub. Suddenly one of them stopped and handed a man a mass of money and in return received a little bag of white powder. I moved past this group quickly staring straight ahead, not looking at anyone until I was out the door and on another walkway.

The most peaceful places were walkways. The only trouble was they only went one way and led me to places I didn't want to go. I would have been happy to spend some time going backwards and forwards if they only went back as well as forward. The next doorway announced movie theatres in bright lights. There were 24 simultaneous movies running in this complex, open 20 hours a day. Maybe I could pass my time watching a movie or two. I still hadn't come across anyone from the *Tom Thumb* who I could recognise, but from what I had seen they would eventually come through to this place. When would Keethe and Berte come past?

I looked at the billboard on the walls for a film I would like to watch. I could see there were no cartoons or kiddy films being screened here! They were all top rating adult violent films. I didn't want to go through any of these doors and there were 25 of them. Wait on, weren't there only 24 movies? Yes, one of the doors led to a food hall. Good! Maybe I could pass the time there and keep an eye out for my friends to come past at the same time. If they didn't come this way, how would I find them? It was impossible for me to return to the gambling hall now and collect Keethe and Berte at the entrance like we agreed to do.

I found a table and as soon as I sat down a waitress came over to me.

"What will you have?" she asked me.

I didn't know what food they sold there so I told her I only had chips and no money. She said I could pay her with chips but it would cost more because she would have to arrange a money transfer. Why didn't this surprise me? I gave her my chips and she took them away. She eventually came back with \$300AZ. Now altogether I had lost \$150AZ and hadn't received anything in return other than mental harassment. I felt very insecure in this place. The waitress waited for my order. I asked her to bring me something nice from the menu and a drink. It didn't matter to me what it was. I was told it would cost me \$50 so I now had a grand total of \$250 left. I knew I was in trouble. There was no way I could pay the place back for the \$500 and the hire of the suit.

For once I was in a place that was relatively quiet. There was no music and little conversation going on between couples. The only noise I could hear was the tinkling of plates and glasses. The waitress returned with a small glass of green coloured drink and a small cake on a saucer and then headed off again. I took a sip of the drink which tasted like weak fruit juice but salty. I didn't like it at all but I was thirsty so I drank it down. It only made me feel thirstier. Then I ate the cake, which was stale and had little taste. I think I sat there for a couple of minutes and watched people going by. I

still hadn't recognised anyone. There were thousands of people going by. As soon as I had finished the food and drink the waitress came back and asked me if I wanted something else. I thanked her and told her I didn't and she told me to leave. She needed the chair for customers. I asked her if it was possible to get back to the gambling hall but she just walked away without answering me.

I can't remember meeting ruder people than these, not even on Earth. Maybe there were some on Earth, but because of my age I hadn't experienced them, thank goodness. I could see the waitress pointing me out to a bouncer, who was as wide as he was tall. I stood up and after pushing my chair in was off again. I could actually walk around the movie hall going from door to door without being forced to go inside, but after three circuits I was getting pretty tired of doing that. I asked someone if there was a way out but he completely ignored me. No one spoke to anyone else unless they were with friends or co-workers. I worked up enough courage to walk up to a bouncer and ask him the way out because I wanted some fresh air. He asked me if I had any money on me and I told him no. I knew it was a lie but I didn't want to lose any more of it for no reason.

He said to me, "Then you can have as much fresh air as you like."

He took me by the arm and waved to a few of his friends who came over and grabbed hold of me also. No one even noticed what was happening. I told them to let me go but they took no notice. I began making lots of noise to attract attention but no one cared. I was pushed through a swinging door and the next thing I remember I was sliding down a tube and landing on something hard. I stood up. It was dark and cold wherever I was. I couldn't see a thing and stood still for a while waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness before making a move.

I was finding out my suit wasn't offering me much protection from the cold. It was made of cheap synthetic fabric. I was shivering now and as I breathed, the air from my mouth turned to vapour. It was quiet here and I couldn't see anyone around but I had the strange feeling there were people somewhere near. After my eyes had adjusted I could see I was standing on an old road under one of the walkways. Looking up I could see people moving along it. I knew they couldn't see me from the inside because I had been unable to see what was outside when I was there. But it wouldn't have helped even if they had seen what happened. They wouldn't have been interested, because all of them were so intent on getting to where they were going staring straight ahead.

I had not liked being up there at the time but now I wished I was still inside. If that was a bad place to be, this was a very bad place to be. I could tell. The next voice I heard was,

"Hand over your money or I'll stab you!"

I put my hand in my pocket and took out my remaining \$250 and gave it to him.

"Now the coat!" Came the order.

I took off my coat and handed it to him. Then I was left alone. So much for thinking I was in bad shape before because now I was even worse off. Without my coat my white shirt offered even less warmth. It, too, was made of a very light synthetic material. It was fine for inside the city but not much good outside in the cold. What would happen now? What next was in store for me?

There were people down here. Not just robbers but others huddled on the footpath and up against walls of old buildings that looked like they had been neglected for

years. I was in the old city over which they had built the new hi-tech one. I walked along the footpath stepping over people. None of them huddled together to keep warm because everyone was alone down here. I understood why. I tried to open some of the doors but every door and window had been boarded up. I didn't want to stop walking, because I thought I would die from the cold if I did. I decided to follow the walkway from underneath and retrace my steps. This made me feel a little better because it was something I couldn't do while I was up in the new city. I remembered something James had told me. He had said we should always find something good in any situation we found ourselves in. I began thinking back to *Near Perfect*, which was now more perfect than I could have imagined in comparison to this. I began to miss Mum, Dad and Sue again. Think of something good? I was going back the way I came and might find a way out, that was good. I was cold without my jacket but this spurred me on to keep going, that was good. If I still had my jacket I might fall asleep like some of the others on the footpath who may never get up again because of the cold. So there were many good things for me to think about as I walked along.

Keep positive I was telling myself. It wasn't long before I was underneath the gambling hall. I walked further to find a fence sealing off the old city to the outside world. I could even see the parking lot in the distance. How was I going to survive until Peaterr came back and how was I going to get from here to there, just a matter of metres away? I looked around and found a tube entrance under the suit-hiring place and walked back further to find another one under the gambling hall. Not far from this tube were two bodies huddled together. This was the first time I had seen two together, obviously trying to keep warm. They were just small mounds. I pushed one of them with my foot.

"What are you doing? Leave us alone."

This reply made me feel much better.

"Keethe, Berte!" I exclaimed.

"Is that you, Kaavan?" Berte replied and I saw the mounds move.

I got down and huddled with them.

"What are we going to do?" I asked them.

"I just want to die," said Keethe.

"Hey, don't give up. We'll get out of here. Don't worry."

Huddling together we kept warm enough to survive the night.

In the morning it was still dark compared with living up north and it was still very cold. I was glad to see we were all alive. I was so glad to see Keethe and Berte and they were equally glad to see me, but they were not in good shape. I could see they had both taken a beating.

Berte said, "We lost all our money."

I told them I had lost mine too. I said mine had been stolen and Berte, who could see the funny side of things, said that at least they had had some fun gambling their's away. Keethe wasn't at all well. Berte asked me if I had any ideas about what we should do. I couldn't think of anything, but I said I'm sure the three of us could come up with something if we tried really hard. We walked around in circles to get warm. It wasn't working. I asked Berte about his Mum and Dad. Where were they? He had no idea what had happened to them. They hadn't heard from any of the others who were aboard the *Tom Thumb* either.

I went for a bit of a walk up to the fence. I could see a tractor like the one James had back in *Near Perfect*. On the back of it was a cage and there were 6 large men walking along beside it. It was coming through the parking lot and heading towards the fence. I ran back to the others and said we were in real trouble. My thoughts were that these men were going to round up anyone in the old city and somehow dispose of them. I hoped I was wrong but I didn't want to be around to find out. The only thing I could think of doing was hiding. Maybe we could hide in the tube coming from the gambling hall. I had to push the other two into the tube. Although the tube was steep it did flatten out towards the bottom and there were joins in the tube that we could put our feet on and remain standing inside without falling back out onto the ground. We had to remain in there for what seemed like hours but was probably only 10 minutes. I hoped no one would come flying down the tube at us, because not only would we fall out, but we would be seriously injured in the process. I hoped the guys collecting people wouldn't check the tubes as they went past or we would be done for. They didn't check. At one stage Berte and I had to hang on to Keethe because he felt faint. I could tell Keethe was very ill.

After the tractor had gone past we climbed out of the tube and Berte sat down with Keethe while I followed the tractor to see where it was going. From a distance I could see the men putting people from the footpath into the cage. Then I saw a fancy looking craft coming in the opposite direction. It stopped at the tractor and people were asking questions. I couldn't make out what they were saying. I tried running back to the others but I just didn't have the energy to out run the craft, which was now flying just above the road surface. I was about 20 metres from the others when it passed me. It stopped where Keethe and Berte were. I got there in time to see Berte being pushed into this craft and Keethe staggering about on the footpath. Berte was making all sorts of noises about Keethe and me saving his life overnight. One of the guys in the craft told him he was just doing what he was told, which was to pick him up. He hadn't been told about anyone else. I was leaning up against the craft and heard Berte say,

"I just don't want to be in your shoes when my Dad finds out you haven't brought my friends along."

There was a 10-second silence and then one of the guys said,

"All right get in."

I helped Keethe into the craft and followed close behind and in an instant we were flying up above the city. It was nice and warm in the craft, a bit too warm if anything, but I wasn't about to complain.

No one spoke until we landed on the top of a giant dome where a miniature aero-bridge and platform appeared just before our arrival. It was then one of the men aboard the craft said for us to get out and follow the passage until we met someone who would give us further directions. Berte and I supported Keethe along the passage and down some stairs. I hoped he could get some medical attention soon. At the end of the corridor a lady asked us who we were and Berte told them he was the son of the Bakers. In an instant there were people showing us along a hall to a lift. Another young lady accompanied us in the lift and along a corridor until we stood in front of a bright red door. I remember the number 5 painted on it. She knocked for us and Berte's father appeared. He was dressed in a very smart sports jacket and striped pants, and chewing something. When he saw the three of us he said,

“I only wanted my son. The others aren’t welcome here.”

My mouth dropped and Keethe became rather heavy in our arms.

“Then I don’t want any of this either,” Berte told him and the three of us started to walk along the corridor again with the lady watching us with a frown.

“I was only joking, Berte. Come in, all of you.”

And as he said this Berte’s father stood back from the door while we turned Keethe around and walked into the apartment.

The apartment was all luxury from its expensive furniture to the artworks on the walls. We sat Keethe down in one of the lounge chairs.

“So what do you think?” asked Berte’s Dad, spreading his arms out and looking around the room.

“I think we should get a doctor to see Keethe. He is very sick.” I pointed out.

Berte’s Dad replied, “I mean about this place. Is it good or what? Your Mum will be back from the hairdressers soon, Berte, and then we’ll order some lunch.”

“Mr. Baker do you think you could call a doctor for Keethe, please?”

I asked as politely as I could. Mr. Baker, who of course is Berte’s Dad, came over and had a closer look at Keethe’s face.

“He does look very pale!” he exclaimed and walked over to the phone and picking up the handset spoke into it.

“This is Baker in 5. Send a doctor to our room at once. We have a very sick boy here.”

He walked back to us and seeing we were very worried about Keethe said,

“The doctor won’t be long or I’ll have him sacked. How are you Berte? Let me look at you.”

He could see Berte had been hit around the head as well. Then he looked at me and said.

“How come you aren’t hurt? Weren’t you meant to be looking after them?”

I didn’t answer him but felt like giving his face a few bruises. I know I shouldn’t have been thinking that way but I really didn’t like Mr. Baker.

It was only a couple of minutes and the doctor was at the door and being ushered in by Mr. Baker. The doctor straight away called for assistance on the apartment phone. He explained to Mr. Baker that Keethe would have to spend some time in hospital, but he would keep him informed of his progress. When the others arrived Keethe was placed on a stretcher and taken from the room. I wanted to go with him but the doctor said I would only get in the way and he promised he would get the best treatment. I had problems with trusting anyone in *Chance Your Luck* but this time I had no choice.

When Mrs. Baker arrived, Mr. Baker ordered lunch. It wasn’t a bad meal. It was prepared so it looked really good, but its taste was nothing compared to the taste of food at *Near Perfect*. Everyone ate well except me. I wasn’t very hungry even though I hadn’t eaten much over the last 20 hours. Mr. Baker showed Berte and me around their apartment, which was very impressive. The view of the city from their balcony was also impressive even in the half daylight of *Chance Your Luck*. At night, with the lights of the city on, it would be spectacular. This building and its balconies were under the cover of one of the many domes in the city. Therefore, even out on the balcony, you remained warm. I looked at some of the brochures they had on the coffee table and how only the best materials were used and the best people employed

by the apartment building's management. It went on to say that no expense is spared to ensure comfort for all its customers. People were coming and going in the apartment. It took three people to bring up the lunch and set the table for the meal. Others came and went after making adjustments to things and fussing around. I again thought of *Near Perfect* where everything anyone needed was close at hand and didn't require people fussing over you. At *Near Perfect* there were no temperature controls to adjust because the temperature was already set correctly. And when we wanted to eat we had delicious food right there at our fingertips. We had friends we could talk to and not employees fussy around like slaves doing almost nothing just so they could get a tip from Mr. Baker. This place was so false.

"Don't you just love this place? I wouldn't want to live anywhere else." Mr. Baker told Berte.

All I knew was I wanted out of there, but how was that going to happen? I couldn't just leave because I would again end up on the streets to be swept up the next morning. I had to go along with these people, which I hated because it meant I would have to be false too. I told the Bakers I liked their apartment as I was shown around with Berte. This made Mr. Baker happier with me. I thought I might need to be on his side to get out of there. I was worried about Keethe and so was Berte. Berte rang the hospital while we listened in on the speaker phone. Berte was told Keethe was recovering. This was good news because at one stage I thought we would never see or hear from him again. He had a ruptured spleen so they were giving him drugs that would dissolve the organ. He would be able to live without his spleen but if he wanted to later he might like to grow a new one. They were offering that procedure if he would like it. They said they would send the bill to Mr. Baker for what they had done so far, along with an estimated cost for the other procedure. He could pay now for both or just for what Keethe had received to date. I asked the person at the other end of the phone when Keethe would be released from hospital and he said we could pick him up the next morning. I was so glad he didn't say he would have to remain there for a week. What would we have done then?

After hanging up and before Mr. Baker could say anything I thanked him very much for doing this for Keethe. I said, not everyone was as kind and generous as he was and we appreciated what he had done, which had saved all our lives. He actually smiled at me and said,

"It's costing me money boy, but it is good I can help out."

Later I asked Berte what his plans were because mine were to get Keethe in the morning and somehow find our way to the *Tom Thumb* later in the day. I could see Berte wasn't happy here either, even though he did seem to have everything. We found out that Berte's Dad had won lots of money gambling, but we were pretty certain he'd go back to the tables, if not that night the one after, and lose everything. There certainly wasn't anyone in *Chance Your Luck* going to help him or his Mum when they were broke. We both decided to try and talk his folks into coming back to *Near Perfect* with us.

At dinnertime Mr. Baker chatted away about how well he had done with Black Jack and that he was thinking of going back to the tables that night and to make another killing. I didn't like his choice of words. I suggested we might like to stay in and watch a movie.

"Where's your adventure?" he asked me.

Last night was enough adventure for me. Berte then asked him whether he was considering leaving tomorrow to go back to *Near Perfect*.

His response was, "Are you kidding? What is so great about that place? Here I can use my skills and make something of myself. I am important and people know it. Have you noticed how they bow when they come into the apartment? I'm not going to give all this up. And after another night of winning I will be able to have an even better style of living."

I guess that said it all. But how were we going to keep Mr. Baker here so he didn't lose all he had that night?

I asked him, "Can you order anything you like here?"

Puffing out his chest he said, "I can order anything my heart desires."

So I said, "Then why don't we all have a drink? Berte and I are adults here and neither of us have ever had a drink before. Wouldn't you like to have one with your son? It's a special time in a guy's life having a drink with his Dad. And you have all this to celebrate."

But Mr. Baker said, "I tell you what. I'll take you both to the gambling hall tonight and we can have a drink at the bar before I start working the tables and fleecing them of more precious money."

I didn't know what to say here but Berte was really good and followed up with, "Remember how Great Grandma had a drinking problem. What is to say I haven't inherited it from her?"

This fired his Dad up. "No son of mine has a drinking problem?"

So Berte said, "There is no harm in checking is there? I wouldn't mind a drink right now?"

Mr. Baker walked to the phone and ordered some booze to be sent up straightaway.

I hadn't been able to find out from Berte if he would be prepared to leave his family here tomorrow, if there was no way of getting them into the *Tom Thumb*. But I was pretty sure he didn't want to stay. Like me he had seen the evil side to this place. His parents hadn't seen how these people could turn from bowing and scraping to sweeping you off the street into the rubbish. All sorts of grog or booze arrived for us to try – or more correctly, for Berte to try. When the drink arrived Mr. Baker poured out two glasses of spirits from a bottle. I know knew I wasn't going to be included in the drinking session. Although it made me feel unwelcome I was glad, because at least I would be sober at the end of it. Mr. Baker handed one of the glasses to Berte and said,

"Get that into you!"

Berte had a sip of it and began to cough. This made his Dad laugh as he drank his entire drink in one gulp.

"Can I have some water and ice with this do you think?"

Mr. Baker got up and went into the kitchen.

"Quick, give me the glass!" I said.

Berte handed it to me. I poured it back into the bottle and poured the same amount of wine into his glass. Mr. Baker was back in a minute with a tray of ice and a jug of water in his hand. He put some ice into Berte's glass and handed it to him again and Berte drank some of it. I picked up the spirit bottle and asked Mr. Baker whether he wanted another one.

He held his glass out while I filled it.

“I’ll just wait for Berte to finish.”

Berte was drinking it down slowly. I could see the wine and ice weren’t the best tasting combination in the world but it did contain a lot less alcohol. While he was doing this I looked at the labels on the bottle and their alcohol content. There was something called OP Rum, which had almost twice the alcohol content of the spirit that Mr. Baker was drinking. I thought this information might come in handy a bit later.

“Nice and smooth? This is the most expensive scotch you can buy, son?” he said to Berte as poor Berte was just finishing off his wine and ice.

“Fill his glass up for him again, boy,” Berte’s Dad said to me.

I picked up the scotch bottle and poured a little in.

“More than that. What do you think this is?”

I put some more in. Berte now had as much as Mr. Baker had in his glass. This was definitely going to turn into a drinking competition.

“Down the hatch,” he said looking at his son. Berte sipped as Mr. Baker finished his second drink.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” said Mr. Baker as he got up and headed off, presumably to the bathroom.

While he was gone I quickly filled Mr. Baker’s glass with scotch, tipping the rest of the bottle onto a poor pot-plant and refilled the scotch bottle with wine. Berte tipped his drink and ice out onto another plant and sat down. I took the top off the OP Rum bottle.

Mr. Baker returned and sat down.

“Ready for another I see.”

He picked up the scotch bottle and poured Berte another drink. He sat down and seeing his glass was full said,

“Cheers,” and swallowed the drink down.

I poured Mr. Baker’s next drink from the OP Rum bottle and Berte had another wine with some more ice and water. I watched Mr. Baker’s face grimace as he drank the rum.

“Everything okay, Mr. Baker?” I asked him.

He said for me to give him another one. After a few more rums Mr Baker said he was feeling really good and relaxed and asked how Berte was going. Berte said he was feeling fine. Just after Mr Baker had said he was proud of him he nodded off to sleep.

I asked Berte how he was really feeling and he said, “Sick,” but went on to say, sick of the bad taste in his mouth. We left Mr. Baker in the chair and went off to what would be our bedroom for the night. Berte’s Mum had gone out just before the drinking session had started, mumbling that she was going for a walk to get some fresh air. I was about to ask Berte what he thought would happen tomorrow when we heard talking in the other room. We went to investigate and saw Mrs. Baker getting Mr. Baker up out of the chair to take him to their room.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” she told us. About 5 minutes later she came into the bedroom.

“Are you all right, Berte?” she asked, “You haven’t had too much to drink have you, Berte, Keethe?”

“No, Mum,” Berte replied.

She sat on the bed and said, “I know what you are up to.”

We both went a little pale. “I don’t like being here any more than you do. What other ideas do you have?”

It was then we knew she would be on our side and I began to feel more comfortable.

That night I found Mrs. Baker to be a completely different person from what I thought she was. She was quite nice. I had never had a conversation with her before because Mr. Baker was always around. During her walk she had been to see how Keethe was getting along in hospital. I liked her even more now. She said he was asleep when she saw him but he was a better colour than when we brought him here earlier. It was great she had been to see him. Now the three of us had to put our heads together and work out a plan of escape tomorrow evening.

I later thought to myself. How come the bottles of drink Mr Baker had ordered were scotch, rum and wine? Wouldn’t this be just an Earth thing? For a start scotch came from Scotland on Earth. People in this place must have been able to duplicate what people wanted some how. I could only think that someone from Earth must have explained to them what each drink tasted like. In that case, there must be others from Earth who were doing as well if not better than Mr Baker was in this place.

Next morning Mr. and Mrs. Baker stayed in bed while Berte and I had some breakfast. We could see that Mrs. Baker had cleared away all the bottles in the lounge room before she went to bed the night before. After breakfast Berte and I headed off to get Keethe. We got directions to the hospital from Berte’s Mum the night before but needed someone to point out his bed when we got there. Again no one was interested in helping us until Berte stamped his feet and in a loud voice exclaimed,

“What does a person have to do around here to get attention! Listen to me all of you. I am Berte Baker of room 5 and my family will be checking out of here if I don’t get some assistance. I want to see my friend Keethe Benson, and now, not in an hour’s time, do you hear me?”

Straight away a man and woman were with us bowing and showing us to Keethe’s room. We went in tentatively expecting to see him still in bed but his bed was empty. Alongside it was a chair and Keethe was sitting up in it looking a million dollars, so to speak.

“What took you guys so long?” was all he said.

We smiled at each other and both Berte and I patted him on the back as he got up from the chair. Keethe was back in his suit, which had seen better days and Berte was still wearing his. I was the odd one out in shirtsleeves. Berte’s Mum had arranged payment for Keethe’s treatment so we were able to get out of that place without much trouble.

On the way back to the apartment Berte said we needed some better clothes than we were wearing so we headed off to one of the up-market clothes shops in the building. We selecting some really trendy suits, which to the untrained eye looked just like our old suits used to look, except they were made from better quality material. When back in the apartment Keethe had something to eat and we took turns showering and dressing in our new gear. This all happened before Berte’s parents got up.

Mrs. Baker loved our clothes. The night before she had said the whole city revolved around impressions. If we had expensive suits, people would take notice of us. While Mr. Baker was taking a shower, Mrs. Baker was on the phone smoothing our path out of there. She called up the suit rental place and paid all the money we owed them and gave them a very generous tip. She called security and demanded they supply us with the 5 best guards they had, to escort us off the premises that evening. She told them we were going on a trip and that we'd be away two days. She then said for the same guards to make themselves available two days later when we again entered *Chance Your Luck* to escort us back to our apartment. Of course the second part of this demand would not happen but made them think we would be returning, which would be the normal thing to do. Mrs. Baker had all the arrangements made before Mr. Baker appeared for breakfast. He wasn't looking well and was surprised to see how good Berte looked.

"You're a chip off the old block," he said to him. "I'm proud of you."

We later explained to Keethe what had happened the night before. He had been a bit in the dark about what was going on, but he did know we couldn't risk missing Peaterr in the *Tom Thumb*.

Mrs. Baker announced to Mr. Baker that the rest of the morning would be spent going for a walk while their apartment was being cleaned. She said we would be going to the movies in the afternoon because she had a treat for Mr. Baker that involved a trip to another place where the lifestyle was much superior to this one.

Mr. Baker smiled and asked, "Will this other city involve gambling?"

Mrs. Baker thought for a second and said, "The trip we are about to make is the biggest gamble we have ever faced."

That afternoon we sat in one of the movie halls watching some mindless violent movie during which the audience laughed at the misfortune of the people being assaulted. Fortunately, Keethe, Berte and myself would miss most of it. While Mrs. Baker entertained Mr. Baker watching this rubbish, the three of us slipped out. While on our walk earlier we had checked out where the security stations were in this part of the city. We spread out and moved from one security station to another asking after anyone who had been on board the *Tom Thumb*. There were security people in this city who knew exactly where everyone was at any one time. And all we had to say to get action, now we were so well dressed, was we were the sons of Mr. Baker of apartment 5.

We had 4 hours before Peaterr would be arriving to pick us up. We told security that anyone from the *Tom Thumb* who wished to make our acquaintance should be taken by security guards to the main entrance where their debts would be paid in full if they had any. They could then depart on a two-day trip with us if they were interested. We emphasised they would have to be at the entrance in three and a half hours' time. We also made arrangements for those working in the streets to bring anyone who knew about the *Tom Thumb* to the entrance as well. This was all we could do for our fellow travellers who might otherwise be stuck here. Some may have already died as a result of coming to this place.

We returned to the movie but I don't remember watching much of it. I was concerned for those people not wanting to be here, but what else could we do? We returned to the apartment afterwards and were escorted to the entrance by our personal guards. Approaching the entrance, Mrs. Baker said she had a surprise for Mr. Baker

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and had one of the guards put a blindfold on him. This guard was told not to let him take it off until he was told to. Mr. Baker was excited and said he loved surprises. He was left with the guard at one side of the entrance while we went around looking for more of our *Tom Thumb* people. There were 15 others rounded up. We were not sure that all of them were really from the *Tom Thumb*, but we paid everyone's bill and had the security people take us all out to the craft, which was just landing. Mr. Baker was the last to be put into his seat with the blindfold still on him.

I heard Mrs. Baker say, "Not long now Fred."

The cabin door was closed and the security guards outside saluted as we took off vertically. The *Tom Thumb* turned north and we were away. At least four people gave a sigh of relief – but now it was time to take Mr. Baker's blindfold off.

Chapter 16 Who do we have here?

A strange but not surprising thing happened when we took off from *Chance Your Luck*. Most noticeable to me was my jacket became about 10 sizes too large and if I was to stand up my pants would have fallen down. The same thing happened to Keethe and Berte. Looking around at the others, none of them now looked 25 years old and beautiful. We had a mixed group of people in here. In numbers we were about 4 or 5 people short, but some of the people with us were not known to those from Earth. Who were they?

I didn't want to be around when Mrs. Baker undid Mr. Baker's blindfold. But unfortunately I was sitting next to him when he was again given full vision.

"What are you people playing at. Are you crazy? You are kidnapping me."

These were some of the words he was saying, as he realised he had been tricked out of being in *Chance Your Luck*.

"We had to get you out of there for your own good, Fred," said Mrs. Baker.

I don't think this was the thing to say under the circumstances.

"Take me back. You can do what you want but I belong there. I don't want to go back to that boring place."

Peaterr asked me if we had a problem here and I said I could see many problems and maybe I should try and get into the co-pilot seat and discuss them with him. Holding onto my pants at the waist I made my way to the front of the craft, treading on the cuffs of my pants as I went. I made it with great difficulty and once seated I put my seatbelt on.

"Here are the problems I can think of at the moment. We have a man who doesn't want to be here but back in *Chance Your Luck*, but if we take him back we will be splitting up his family. We also appear to have lost four or five people, but this isn't counting some aboard who we have never seen before."

Peaterr agreed we should try and sort things out before going much further away from *Chance Your Luck*. So in the meantime he flew north a few hundred kilometres away from the city and then orbited while we tried to find solutions to our problems. Mr. Baker was still ranting and raving to Mrs. Baker and Berte. I could hear someone else saying,

"What sort of cruise is this? I want to go back".

I turned around as much as I could in my seat and said to everyone that we would talk the problems through. One woman was asking if she had been kidnapped like that other guy. I said no one was being kidnapped. Mr. Baker had stirred up half the people on board with his kidnap statement.

I called James on the radio to see if he had any ideas about what we should do. He came in loud and clear and seemed to know what our problems were before I finished describing them to him. He said he didn't mind anyone we had on board coming to *Near Perfect* to live, but we had to make it clear to all on board what that meant. It might not appeal to everyone. When I turned back, a man I had never seen before today was saying to Mr. Baker.

"What is your problem? You have a family to be with. Don't throw that away for a few dollars."

To which Mr. Baker said, “What would you know about anything and who are you anyway? A few dollars? I would be giving up a million dollars thank you very much.”

The man said, “You mean to say you would give up all you have right here for a mere million dollars? You are crazy!”

Then Mr. Baker said, “Just because you lost everything and can’t go back doesn’t give you the right to comment?”

But the man continued, “You are right I did lose everything but not at *Chance Your Luck*. I lost everything I had at *Delight* to come here. It was so easy for me to leave *Chance Your Luck* this time where I own 1,000 times the money you are leaving there. I don’t know if my family will have me back, but at least I want to have the opportunity of asking them. I know I can’t make it up to them for what I have done.”

I asked the man what his name was and he said, ‘Finny’. I called James and asked him if he knew a ‘Finny’. He said his family was living at *Delight*. I told Finny that we would take him to his family. He was very pleased. With all the argument in the world it looked as though Mr. Baker had made up his mind not to come back with us. We had to agree that if it wasn’t what he wanted we would take him back to *Chance Your Luck*. He would be on his own except for the four people we had taken from *Chance Your Luck* who were under the impression they were on an all expenses paid cruise to somewhere.

Over the next hour we talked to everyone who didn’t know about *Near Perfect* and how this was a one way trip. One couple not originally from *Near Perfect* wanted to give it a go because they hated *Chance Your Luck*. We told them they would be very welcome there. Another couple wanted to come with us, but wanted to pay for people to work for them as servants when they got there. We tried to make them understand that their money would be worthless, and in any case they wouldn’t need servants there, but it was obvious they were not on the same wavelength. They kept on saying they had brought millions of dollars with them so they expected to live in the lap of luxury at *Near Perfect*. We had just about sorted things out so Peaterr called *Chance Your Luck* tower telling them we were returning with some people. He was given clearance to land once more at the northern entrance to the city.

We made certain all those wanting to leave were close to the door.

The only worrying thing was that Mr. Baker hadn’t changed his mind. I heard him telling Mrs. Baker and Berte that it didn’t mean he didn’t love them but he couldn’t pass up this opportunity. He was successful in this city. He had never been successful anywhere in his life before. He couldn’t live at *Near Perfect* where success and money didn’t mean anything to people. He considered himself different from us and would make millions like the other guy had done and return for Mrs. Baker and Berte when he had enough so they could all live in a place that was perfect.

We kept telling him he was only fooling himself. Finny told Mr Baker he had little chance of winning a second time. He was now hooked on gambling and they would get every cent back from him. He would then end up in the street below the city. Berte tried to tell him that he had been there on the street and what it was like but Mr. Baker just wouldn’t listen.

“How come you made so much money then?” Mr Baker asked Finny.

“After my win I got involved in building apartments. I never went back to the gambolling tables after the first time.”

The *Tom Thumb* landed and eight people got out, including Mr Baker. We didn't feel good about this. But what was worse, a number of bouncers were coming towards the craft. We were about to shut the door when a man and women jumped into the *Tom Thumb*. Peaterr took off straight after the door was closed. We were heading north once more.

"Thank you, thank you." The man was saying. "We thought we were doomed to stay in that godforsaken place."

These two were from the original flight. I remembered the lady.

"We missed you before and didn't know what to do. Those baboons back there were after us. You don't know how it feels to be away from that place."

I was pretty sure we did. I asked them if there were any others that had missed us the first time. The lady said they had looked around but hadn't seen anyone from the *Tom Thumb* who they could recognise.

We knew we couldn't risk hanging around any longer and Peaterr was taking the *Tom Thumb* as high as he could and we would cruise at top speed until we reached *Near Perfect*. It wasn't long before we were landing and I was so pleased to see Mum and Dad waiting for me. Sue had already gone to bed. James was there to meet the new comers with his usual warm welcome. There was a lady with a boy waiting. As Finny got out of the *Tom Thumb* he saw them and tears began to flow, and not just from the lady's eyes either. After a few seconds Finny was holding the lady close to him. I looked across at Berte and Mrs. Baker who had their heads bowed and were walking back to their place without Mr. Baker. Keethe had met up with his father and was jabbering away to him. I noticed him pointing to his side. I guessed he was telling him about his injuries.

Back at our place I had a good feed of delicious food followed by a restful sleep. I was so tired I slept through to the middle of the next day. The first thing I did after lunch was visit Berte and his Mum. I really felt for them. They told me they were doing all right. They knew nothing more could be done because Mr. Baker had made his decision to go it alone. They knew they had to accept this and over time they thought things would get better for them, but this didn't mean they would ever forget him. They remembered the good times they had shared together.

Over the next few months I had the best time I could remember in all my life, all 13 and a half years of it. Even though some of us were still young we had experienced a lot of life. These months were free of trouble for me and I could spend endless hours playing with my friends and doing things with Dad. There were some great bush-walks to go on and enough time to spend together as a real family. Not just my family, but all the families around became one big family. We had time to take notice of one another and learn more about others. I can't describe in words how great it was. I wanted this life never to come to an end. But as it always seems to happen, this good thing was coming to an end.

After some time a few of the top people in charge of the voyage were getting together to discuss strategies. They were happy with the way things were going, but began asking questions of each other. Had we lost the plot when it came to discovery here on AZ? How could we contact Earth with our discoveries? If something happened to Earth would this planet support as many people as we could bring here? It was only then that I found out the real reason for the voyage. It was to find an alternate place to Earth should something happen to it. People high up in Earth

politics wanted to find out if an escape to another planet would be possible. Voyages like ours would determine this.

Future hazards facing Earth were destructive war (this is when weapons of destruction make it impossible to exist in parts of the planet for many years), overpopulation and environmental breakdown. I must add that none of these things were actually happening when we left Earth over a year and a half ago. These were 'what ifs' to me and for many others now on *AZ* and had no real meaning.

In fact, for centuries people had been worrying that people were changing the environment so much that we were destroying the world. However, over time, not one of the forecast catastrophes had eventuated. We had actually found the Earth to be very resilient to changes. It had some petty good balancing tricks we were finding out about.

The forecast increase in carbon dioxide to dangerous levels had not occurred because more trees grew as a result of increased carbon dioxide. In return they provided more than enough oxygen. We also found that trees and shrubs on land were not as important as we thought for oxygen production. There was many times more vegetation in the oceans than on the continents. Global warming fears had dissipated because the increase in temperature had increased the cloud cover and there was more rain to water the plants. Increased cloud levels cut down on the amount of Sun's rays to the Earth, which in turn cooled the planet.

AZ had a greenhouse environment and this was worth studying. We hadn't felt any adverse effects from the place, other than we never got to see the sun during the day. One of the scientists with us said he believed the Earth was once very similar to *AZ*.

I want to make it clear that I think we should look after whatever environment we live in. I didn't say people had not changed Earth's environment. They had. I just think we sometimes become alarmed without knowing all the facts. No one wants to live in a rubbish tip and it is right for us to live 'low impact' lives for the sake of future generations. We also don't want to see species of animals and plants dying out. We need to protect them if possible. There is nothing wrong with us using the things available to us and I think it is right we do, but not at the expense of depleting all the resources.

The greatest difference that I could see between *Near Perfect* and Earth was that those at *Near Perfect* supported each other. On Earth we have people with remarkable amounts of money which they couldn't spend in 100 lifetimes exploiting others who are dying because of lack of basics like food and water.

I spent some time talking to James and his family and I often told them about how people lived on Earth and this made them very sad. They kept on saying how easy it would be for people there to have all they needed. 'Need' to those at *Delight* or *Near Perfect* meant enough to live on and enjoy. It didn't mean excesses. James was very sad that places like *Chance Your Luck* existed on his planet and he apologised to us for them. He called it an embarrassment. More and more of these were being set up around *AZ*.

One time I remember saying to James that we saw another place resembling *Near Perfect* south of where we were. He said it was probably a place those in *Delight* called *Pretence*. It was no longer inhabited but was founded by two wealthy people from one of the 'hi-tech cities' like *Chance Your Luck*. It was advertised as an

alternate lifestyle and looked to be similar to *Near Perfect* but was established with the wrong motives. People came from 'hi-tech cities' to experience the simple life and paid a lot of money for the privilege. It attracted people from all over AZ. All people needed to live there was money.

People from *Delight* made visits to *Pretence* offering the true *Delight* lifestyle and a few listened and came to *Delight* but the majority only laughed. They said who could trust a place that didn't rely on money. After a year *Pretence* folded and its inhabitants, along with hundreds of others they picked up along the way, went on to the 'hi-tech cities'. Even though the place folded it was regarded as a success and they plan to start other places just like it to attract even more people to their cities in the future.

After hearing this, I asked James if *Near Perfect* had people working in places like *Chance Your Luck*. He said they did have but they had to be very careful as this was a dangerous occupation. They focussed on those who were down on their luck. Of course, the so-called successful people didn't need their help. In fact, some of the rich had made it very difficult for those from *Delight* staying there. He said it was marvellous we were able to get Finny out. Finny was one of the very few rich people from *Chance Your Luck* who now realised the importance of loving others and not just himself. He now considers it evil living the way he was, off the misfortune of others. But even more marvellous was that he could reunite with his family and that he intended to go back into the city from time to time and encourage others to come to their senses and hopefully to *Delight*. He is one of the few people who really knows how the city operates. He is ranked in the top 100 money earners there.

I was thinking about poor Mr. Baker when James said this. I asked him if Finny could check up on him. James said he was on the top of the list of people for him to see and while he remained alive, there was hope for Fred Baker. James hoped that Fred would eventually see for himself what the place was really like and want nothing more to do with it. Hopefully he would eventually miss his family and want to rejoin them like Finny had.

Chapter 17 The really big decision

The Captain aboard the *Investigator* was keen to know what people on *AZ* were doing and thinking. We hadn't built a city with our geodesic domes but had moved into a farming area already established. We had found out that the planet was inhabited by some friendly, and some not so friendly, beings. The food was good where we were and in theory people could establish a colony here. On the maps and notes Peaterr had studied over the past few months there were other continents than the one we were on which were larger than those on Earth. As far as accommodating everyone, it looked as though *AZ* could fit everyone from Earth along with its present population, which he had estimated from books we had. There were no large desert areas like those on Earth. There were some sharp mountain peaks, but these appeared to be mostly confined to this particular continent. Therefore, most land areas could be settled.

Peaterr asked James what he thought about a possible invasion of his planet by people from Earth? He said if all the people were like us there wouldn't be a problem. Peaterr let him know that Earth had its fair share of *Chance Your Luck* people and how they were spread across communities. We were a mix of good and evil, and evil would occur wherever we lived. James repeated what we had heard him say before, nowhere is perfect, not in this life.

The captain of the *Investigator* was now telling us the cruiser needed to depart for Earth soon. I was under the impression it could remain in space for years without needing a thing. Peaterr said he had learned before we arrived at *AZ* this wasn't the case. The 'Atom Meiser' was fast wearing out and was only expected to work efficiently for a few more months. The outside coating of the craft was now considered a risk to the return voyage. Lastly, those on board the *Investigator* who had not been allowed to visit *AZ* were stirring up trouble and demanded they either come to the planet surface or head back to Earth.

The biggest bombshell as far as I was concerned, was Peaterr's announcement that he would definitely be returning to Earth no matter what. He would give up *Near Perfect* to see Rachel and Steven just one more time, even if they no longer wanted any part of him. So while I was naively thinking everything was rosy at *Near Perfect* all these things were undermining what I thought was our new and permanent lifestyle. Not long after these revelations Dad had one of his meetings with the family. He would consider what each of us wanted to do. Sue wanted life to stay the same, which was no surprise to anyone, but this time so did I. What a pity it couldn't last. Mum and Dad wanted to return to Earth, not because they weren't happy at *Near Perfect*, they were. They were missing relatives back home who would also be missing them. They had promised to return to Earth as soon as it was possible for them, and that didn't mean staying on *AZ* if they didn't have to. When we started out we all thought we would return to Earth in a couple of years' time, but I thought that life here had changed that.

I asked Mum and Dad whether they would let me stay at *Near Perfect* if they returned to Earth. What they really wanted me to do was agree with their decision. That didn't answer my question. They said Sue would definitely have to go with them. That still didn't answer my question but I knew what they thought. It was a *Near Perfect* thing. Even though they would miss me more than anything else, and I

would miss them, it was my decision to make. They wouldn't stand in my way. Dad pointed out that if they returned to Earth without me the most likely outcome would be that we would never see each other again. I didn't know if I could live with that.

Peaterr was planning his farm back on Earth. He could afford some land with the salary he had accumulated on the voyage. He would invite his family to live with him. He wanted to create his own *Near Perfect* on Earth, which to him would be more perfect than this one because he would be with his family. He said my family could buy land close to them and we could all live happily ever after. I pointed out that it would be much harder work on Earth, living in the country, than it was here. He would have to water his trees, and spray them, and prune them and some years he wouldn't get a crop. There would be plenty of flies and ants around as he sat on his verandah. Of course he knew all this.

James made another tour of our homes answering any questions we might have. I really didn't want any of us to be separated again. But some separation had to happen. The special life on *Near Perfect* was coming to an end.

I asked James, "How do you know what happens after we die?"

And he asked me, "How come you don't know? Don't you find it strange that none of you know why you were born, what you are meant to do while you are alive and what happens after you die?"

I replied, "On Earth we have philosophers who over the years have tried to work it all out but they all have different ideas."

"Ideas don't come into it. What someone thinks has no relevance to truth. What I think or do doesn't decide reality, does it?"

I could see I was getting out of my depth.

"Can you just tell me how you know what you know?"

"I was told and now I can tell others."

"But who told you?"

"Did you know that you and Peter are the only people I've met from Earth who want to discuss these things with me. All the others just don't want to know. All of you have seen how we live here. We genuinely feel for others and not just take things for ourselves. For us this is how life should be. We aren't wasting our time chasing after things. Relationships are the important issues for us. We know why we are here and what we are meant to do. This doesn't mean everything always turns out because it doesn't, but we try. The best thing is we know what is going to happen even when we die."

"But life is for finding these things out, isn't it?"

"Of course, but after finding out the basics, isn't it time to live that way and not go on spending all your life doing the finding out? How long do people from Earth take to find a purpose for their life?"

"Sometimes never I guess."

"What a waste of life that is, not knowing why you are here. This is living without a purpose, without a direction, which is not really living at all."

"Maybe our purpose is different on Earth from yours on AZ? Things just happen there."

"That's because everyone is doing their own thing?"

"Yes."

"Does it work?"

“I think so. If they decide in the end to do the right thing and not hurt others.”

“All rather haphazard. Tell me why life on Earth shouldn’t be like life here in *Delight or Near Perfect*? We are not just doing things not to hurt others, we are doing things to help them.”

All I could say was, “I think it should be like this.”

“You know even though we are a long way from Earth, we still belong to the same universe. If I know what life is about and what happens when we die, shouldn’t you? Shouldn’t we all be doing the same things together?”

I just didn’t know and couldn’t answer. It was the first time I’d felt confronted by James since we’d been here. My ‘world’ was definitely changing and at the moment for the worse. From contentment it was turning into confrontation and confusion like it is on Earth. I was feeling sad.

Although what James had said, did get me thinking. Mainly that life and everything doesn’t just happen and it isn’t a random process. Everything on Earth had a purpose for being there. It did seem strange to me that people were the only ones not knowing why they existed and what they should be doing. Helping others seemed a really worthwhile thing to do. It gives people a purpose in life and at the same time can make you feel good. I didn’t understand the other things he was saying so I won’t include them in my book.

My perspective of life had changed in *Near Perfect*. There was a lesson here somewhere and hoped I’d learn it and soon, but at the moment my brain was hurting from all the thinking it had done.

Everything involves thinking, which was sometimes as hard as seeing and hearing. This was not to be confused with looking and listening, which were passive, not active. I’d learnt a lot from the way James and his people were living and how they treated other people. I’d also learnt from the scientists. They were the ones who taught me to see and hear, really using my eyes and ears. I would never have seen the fish in the water without training myself to do it.

We had seen a lot on this planet, more than I had expected to. We had seen birds, fish and worms that at first were invisible to us. However, none of us had had any trouble seeing the people of *Delight* when we flew over it. But we, and those of *Delight* had been keeping an eye out for each other. Maybe that was the secret. If both parties are actively looking for each other then maybe it isn’t difficult to see them. Our communication channels were open. I guess if I was a fish or even a worm, I would like to remain invisible so predators wouldn’t find me. There was some sort of logic to this.

I asked more people of *Delight* whether they had seen any evidence of visitors that they hadn’t communicated with. I was told there had been unusual signs on occasion. I asked what signs they were talking about. They had seen strange markings on the ground in a field, which they couldn’t explain. I said this kind of thing happened on Earth too. I told James there were always mysterious sightings of spacecraft on Earth. Some people say they had seen aliens but not many people believed them.

I mentioned the conversations I had had with James to Peaterr. He said they were religious. I knew nothing about religion and Peaterr said he knew very little also. He wanted to know if people like James lived on Earth. He tried to research our book index. I guess it wasn’t surprising when he received the message ‘This listing does not

include religious material'. Obviously these books were not considered relevant to voyages into space. But strangely there were books on philosophy, which were listed as scientific and educational in nature.

I didn't know the relevance of all this and most of what was being said went straight over my head. For Peaterr the beliefs of the people from *Delight* were very relevant. They knew how to live and this for him could be the most important discovery of the voyage.

Think for a moment Peaterr said to me. Thinking was what I had been doing a lot of lately and I think I was in thinking overload. But Peaterr went on to say that if James and his people were right in the way they lived here and we lived the same way on Earth, then as we were all part of the universe, just maybe, we would all be together again after we die? This was too deep for me. I said I thought it was just for them and not for us. Peaterr said all we needed to do was believe the same things as James and his family and live the same way. This wasn't going to be easy.

Peaterr really wanted to copy *Near Perfect* on Earth and show people how they should be treating each other. It didn't matter about flies and ants that annoy us, people were the important thing. None of us was perfect but we could sure try and create a near perfect environment. Peaterr said at the moment most of us wouldn't recognise a perfect environment if we fell over it. He knew that somehow we had to make ourselves more ready for it.

He was saying that *Near Perfect* on Earth or anywhere for that matter was not about being perfect, but living a better life. It was now important for him to show people on Earth, this better way of living. James and his family had shown us that part at least. Peaterr now wanted his family to understand what he had learnt out here and tell others so that more people would discover what life was really about. Perfect or not it was the right way to live. I agreed with him on that point, but said I thought there was more to it than that. He was sure there was but it was a start and we shouldn't be sitting back and doing nothing about it.

I really wanted Mr. Baker back with his family. I went around to Berte's place and found him and Keethe on Berte's verandah. Berte was feeling much better about his situation, even though his Dad was no longer around. He said his mother had changed since his Dad left. She made all the decisions now and he thought she was doing a really good job of it without the yelling and screaming.

So Peaterr's mind was made up, the captain's mind was made up, those aboard the *Investigator* had made up their collective mind and so had most of those at *Near Perfect*. Many were going back to Earth including my family. I now had to make up my mind. Peaterr said it didn't matter either way because in the end even if the *Investigator* didn't make it back to Earth he knew he would see me again. Neither distance nor death could really separate us. For him that was a really good thought.

I now worked hard to finish my book. This wasn't as critical if I was going back with my family, but if I was going to help out here someone else would have to take it back with them. Peaterr said he would make certain the whole of my story went into the time capsule, if I decided to stay here.

The captain of the *Investigator* had told the crew that he intended travelling as fast as possible back to Earth. He would set the front fins to the largest suns he could find on the way until the craft was orbiting Earth. He expected the trip to take as little

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as three months, because he was going to pull out all the stops. I couldn't help think that my family's lives were at risk if they decided to return.

Keethe and his parents together with Berte and his mother were definitely staying. The Bakers were not going to give up on Mr. Baker even if it meant Berte going back to *Chance Your Luck* to find him. Would these people need my help? The last thing I had to do was make up my mind.

Chapter 18 Left for dead

Peaterr radioed the Investigator to say that most of those on AZ would be coming back on board. But for the first time he was unable to contact the Captain. Were communications breaking down on *Near Perfect*? James would know what the problem was. So we went looking for him. He was in the orchard collecting fruit when we found him. Peaterr explained what had happened or in this case, what hadn't happened and James looked concerned.

"There is really only one explanation."

"Which is?" Peaterr asked.

"They have left without you."

It took a while for this to sink in.

"No there has to be another explanation." Peaterr continued.

We walked up to James' house very slowly.

James had a screen that showed a small dot moving away from a curved surface. What it was showing was the *Investigator* moving at speed away from AZ. We understood this for ourselves. Well, now it didn't matter that I hadn't made a decision either way. No one was leaving AZ.

Peaterr straightaway told everyone. This was shattering news, even for those not intending to leave AZ now. They might have one-day liked to return to Earth, but now they didn't know if anyone would come back to the planet. It was hardly likely that the Captain and crew of the *Investigator*, if they made it back to Earth, would say we left them on AZ. It was more likely they would tell people back on Earth that we had perished in a catastrophic disaster of some kind. We would be forgotten about in no time at all.

But we were still alive and after the initial shock everyone knew they had to go on with life. We weren't hardship cases. I was content to be alive after what I'd gone through at *Chance Your Luck* but I would probably have stayed here in any case. Peaterr, unable to get back to his family, was shattered. He became depressed and shut himself in his house. No one was allowed in. We had to leave him alone. My family, after the initial shock, was not that unhappy about the situation. They would have been grieving my loss if they had gone back onto the *Investigator* without me. They had made the decision they had because they had been able to. Now it was out of their hands, they could only go with the flow, so to speak.

Over the next few weeks we left food at Peaterr's door each day. It was always missing the next day, so he was eating. We decided to leave him alone to see if he could work things out for himself.

Meanwhile Berte, Keethe and I spent lots of time walking. Each day we would go a little bit further across country. We decided to plan an expedition for a week's walking away from *Near Perfect*. We worked out what we would need for this walk. Other people were planning to do the same thing. Many had been cooped up for days waiting on decisions to leave the planet. Now they had nothing to hold them back. Our parents were a little apprehensive of us going away for that length of time but didn't stand in our way.

With Peaterr not responding to anyone, the captain of the *Tom Thumb* took the initiative of getting people to provide him with details of their expeditions. Each expedition had to have a radio person to contact him at assigned intervals, usually

once a day, providing their location and any other details of interest. Keethe would be our radio-man and we packed a small HF transmitter for him to use. If we missed two scheduled calls, the *Tom Thumb* would come looking for us.

We packed powder food and as few clothes as possible. We wanted to travel as light. The only other useful items were lightweight sleeping mats we took from the *Endeavour* and a map printed from the computer, covering the area we had charted while on the *Endeavour*. I made sure other expeditions had copies of relevant maps. Some planned to go further than what was covered by these maps but at least they would have a reference point to go from.

It would have been good to say goodbye to Peaterr and I hoped I could have a chat with him when we got back. My Mum would continue to supply him with food and make sure he was still alive.

Early one morning we headed off with our families waving us goodbye.

I decided we should walk in a south-westerly direction, where we knew very little about AZ. I found both Berte and Keethe so slow to walk with, it was painful. They just wandered along without any purpose. I had the goal of walking at least 50km in a day while we were on the flat. If we had to travel over more difficult terrain I had anticipated walking 20km per day. In the first day we'd walked just 25km. I had a talk with them. They said it wasn't a race and they were tired. I hoped they would do better the second day.

Day two was a bit better, we walked 35km over more rocky terrain where we had to use our legs more. There was only 'scratchy grass', as Berte called it, and rocks that day. We hadn't sighted any animal life. As we were travelling south-west we would reach the limit of our map by the end of the next day. Day 3 gave us more of a climb over more rocks and less grass. At 30km more that day we had gone off the map by 10km. The others were happy to turn back on day 4 and stroll along, returning in good time at *Near Perfect*. But of course I wanted to go on.

We discussed the rest of our expedition on night 3. Neither of them wanted to move further into the rocks. They were tired and wanted to walk back. I made a deal with them. I would go further on day 4 and they could rest at this camp. Then on day 5 we would start back together. We'd only have to cover the same ground in the same time and it would be down hill on the way back. They disagreed with me. Keethe said there was no way he would let me wander off in this place. They had no idea what to do if I didn't come back. We didn't agree that night.

In the morning everything was seen a little differently and they agreed for me to go on 10km more without them and then I had to come back. I agreed. I headed off alone and at a greater pace. I didn't know what I was expecting to find by going the extra 10km, but at least I would have walked as far as possible on this expedition. It was such a pleasure to walk by myself and not be hindered by the other two complaining. They were also noisy as they walked along. I could go quietly giving myself a chance of seeing animals if they existed here.

I walked the 10km over quite rough terrain and then the ground became flat. About another kilometre on I could see across a plain below me stretching for many kilometres. I sat looking at the view. I reached into my bag and pulled out some water and a food bar to eat. I had come this far in two hours. I could make it back to the boys in quicker time. I would have to climb down rocks to reach the plain so for me this was the end of the walk. I sat quietly looking and listening to see if I could see or

hear something. There had to be lizards at least between these rocks. I was almost in a trance when I was startled by a shadow on the rock in front of me. I turned around quickly but there was nothing there.

I shook my head. The shadow I had thought I'd seen didn't belong to AZ, because it was an Australian-like shadow, one you only see with bright sunlight shining on the subject. I must have day dreamt it. That ruined the rest of my looking and listening. I couldn't concentrate after that. I had better turn back, which I did arriving where I had left the boys four hours after my departure. They had already eaten so I got myself some powdered lunch, which tasted okay. I was so hungry after the walk. We agreed to make tracks and the three of us headed back down over the rocks. This time we travelled at the same pace as each other. They were fresh from their rest and I had slowed down because of my 22km walk that morning.

We didn't say much as we walked and I wasn't going to mention anything about the shadow. But I couldn't help myself, I had to tell someone.

"You know when I said I didn't see anything unusual up at the rock? Well, I did but don't laugh at me. I saw a shadow falling on the rock in front of me but couldn't see what was causing it."

They didn't laugh at me but Berte said, "It's okay to have an imaginary friend? I used to." He was only joking and we all laughed.

Keethe said, "I wonder what it was? What could cause that?"

I didn't know but I wanted to go there again and find out. We were walking into *Near Perfect* and the others split away from me. I continued on to Peaterr's place. I should have gone home first but I knew I'd be held up there and it would be hours before I could see if Peaterr was doing any better.

I knocked on the door. "Come in!" was the reply.

It sounded like the usual Peaterr inside. I went in and there he was sitting at a coffee table in his lounge room, which was covered in papers, not just the table but almost the whole lounge room floor.

"How are you going?" I asked him.

"Who me? Fine thanks. You know it might just be possible to carry it off."

"What is that?"

"Making a spacecraft that can take at least some of us back to Earth. And then of course come back for the others."

"How could we build something that could travel faster than the speed of light?" I asked.

"From the three spacecraft we have here."

He showed me some papers and drawings he had been working on. I listened to him for an hour. He didn't stop talking. He hadn't spoken to anyone in over a week. I think he was making up for it now. After the hour I said I had to check in at home. They would be wondering where I was. But I promised I'd be back.

Before leaving I said, "It is really good to have you back with us."

Peaterr said, "But it was you who has been away."

He smiled. I think he had been further away than I'd been over the week.

We spoke again later. I didn't know if it was possible to build a spacecraft out of the craft we had already, but maybe Peaterr did. He told me he would have to get it right before putting it to the people on AZ. There were engineers here who could shed

some light on the finer points. He would put it to them in a couple of days' time. In the meantime I wasn't to tell anyone about the plan.

I had a favour to ask of Peaterr.

"Before you start disassembling the *Endeavour* would I be able to take it for a short flight, possibly tomorrow?"

He replied, "I don't know about that. What if you crashed it? We need it for our trip back."

"I'd be really careful." I promised him.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I want to check out more around where we walked. I may have discovered something."

"What?" A fair question from Peaterr.

"I don't really know. You see I think I saw a shadow."

"Oh."

"I know it sounds strange but I think I just need to do some more looking and listening to discover what it really was."

I thought he's say something like I'm not going to risk the *Endeavour* for another footprint episode. However, I don't think Peter had really been listening to me.

"Okay, take it. I can see I wouldn't hear the last of it if I stopped you discovering. I have more work to do here, so you will have to fly it alone. Is that okay? This maybe the last flight the *Endeavour* will take in its present configuration."

"More than okay." I answered.

I would ask Keethe and Berte if they wanted to join me. In a way I was hoping they'd say no. But I knew it would be safer to have others along with me. I went up to Berte's place and both of them were sitting on the verandah.

"Want to go for a flight tomorrow?"

"A flight?" Berte asked.

"Up to the rocky ledge I told you about, in the *Endeavour*."

"I guess, as long as I don't have to walk too far."

We were all agreed and the next morning we prepared to go. We took food and water and that was it. I couldn't believe how easy it was to tell Mum and Dad what I was going to do. They said it was fine with them as long as we were careful.

Chapter 19 Switching

It was the first time Keethe and Berte had flown with me, by myself. At first I think they were a little worried. This hadn't occurred to me until we had taken off and were heading south west and Keethe said.

"You know, you're not a bad pilot."

"I've had plenty of practice, but of course you don't know that, do you?"

"I'm just going to sit here holding on, if that's all right with you?" said Berte, a little white knuckled.

Unlike our other take-offs, where we gained height and circled overhead we just took-off into the south west and kept going. There was no reason to fix a heading this time. We knew where we were going. We could see the 'scratchy grass' and the rocks. I knew the terrain well enough to fly two hundred feet above the ground.

Within half an hour we were over the flat rock, which had taken 4 days walking to get to. The flat plain lay out in front of us. We could see it was an enormous area covered in lush green grass. It would have been good to land where I had sat the other day looking out over the plain, but of course we couldn't do that in the *Endeavour*. We surveyed the plain from the air, which we found to be 40km in a south westerly direction and 32km in a north westerly direction. It had small mountain ranges on three sides and the flat rock on the north eastern side.

I decided to land on the plain just below the rock ledge and put the *Endeavour* down gently. Then we stepped out and began looking around. I didn't know what I was expecting to find out here in this barren plain and it didn't look like there was anything much of interest. From the time I stepped out of the craft I sensed we were not alone, but didn't tell the others. Berte and Keethe didn't show any feelings about the place, and as soon as they could, started shouting out so they could hear their echo bouncing off the rock wall.

I said for them to have a drink and something to eat. I was going to walk closer to the rock ledge and have a good look around. I walked about 300 metres from the boys. I could still make them out in the distance. Maybe they were eating because I couldn't hear them any more. I sat on the ground and tried to use all my senses to get a feeling for the place.

It was no more than 5 minutes after sitting down that a shadow appeared over me. This scared me so much that I jumped to my feet. I don't think I've ever moved so fast in my life. All of a sudden there was such bright light all around me that I couldn't see. My eyes actually hurt when I tried to open them, so I put my hand up to my face to protect them.

"Don't worry!" I heard a calm voice say. "You'll get used to it in no time."

"Who are you?" I heard another voice say. This must have been my voice this time.

In the background instead of quiet I could hear strange animal sounds. They sounded something like cows and in the far distance I could hear a dog barking. I slowly opened my eyes to see the plain transformed into what looked like a cattle station, except these animals weren't cows but some other beast. They were bigger than cows and fatter, and woollier. They were more like bison. What was standing beside me? I dreaded to think, but I turned and saw what looked like a hologram of a very tall thin person. He or it wasn't lit up like a hologram but shimmered, more like

the effect of vapour rising from a road on a very hot day. I can't really explain his appearance very well. His shape continually changed but gave the overall impression of a very blurry person. But he must have been solid enough to make a shadow appear on the ground. I began to heat up considerably, not knowing if it was the result of shock, the sun shining or this thing giving off heat.

"Can you see all right now?" The hologram asked me.

"I'm beginning to."

"Just take your time. There is nothing to worry about. I'll explain things in a minute."

The hologram's voice as you can imagine sounded hollow (no pun intended), like someone talking in a drainpipe.

"Where are we?" I asked. But I knew where we were. We hadn't gone anywhere.

"Where are my friends?" I asked.

"They are where you left them," said the thing.

"But I can't see them anywhere. Are they out amongst those cows?" I continued to ramble.

"They are, but they're not here," he said.

I say 'he' because he sounded like a 'he' when he spoke.

"I have 'switched' you."

"What?" I said impolitely.

"I'll explain. You are in the same place as your friends but you have 'switched' to a new *PP*."

"Am I in another time zone?" I asked.

"I don't understand. I don't know the meaning of 'time'?"

"Is this later or earlier than it was before I was 'switched'?"

"No. I still don't understand," he said.

"Can you put things back the way they were, please?"

"Surely."

In an instant it was dark, that is, dark compared with what it had been. I could now make Berte and Keethe out in the distance. It was quiet again. I looked at my hands and they were shaking. What had happened to me? But as quickly as I'd 'switched' last time, it happened again. This time I was in a different place. It looked like a cabin and I was standing next to a chair. In front of me was the hologram.

"Take a seat and I'll explain."

"That would be nice." I said politely.

I was feeling and even talking a little like a character from a fairy tale. Maybe this is what people do when something really strange happens to them? I sat down in the chair and the hologram, sort of leaned up against the table.

"First of all, I'm sorry if I scared you. I didn't mean to. It was wrong for me to 'switch' you to such an alien centre as that first off. But I wanted you to remain in the same place, so you would know you hadn't gone anywhere. I underestimated human frailty when it came to the seeing and hearing department. Is this less threatening for you?"

"Well it is quieter and less bright and even cooler here, but where am I?"

"Somewhere safe."

Now that is helpful I thought to myself.

“I know you want to know more about me. I’m a *fraggib* known as Iffor. (*fraggib* is pronounced ‘fra jib’ and Iffor is pronounced ‘I four’.) And I know you are about to ask how I speak English. Well, I have been listening to you and your friends speak. I have picked your language up rather well, don’t you think?”

“You have what?” I asked.

“English isn’t a very difficult language, not compared to *Ruffor* (‘Roo four’) or *Yannassy* (‘Yan e see’).”

“I guess not.” I don’t know why I said it but I did.

I was becoming more relaxed with Iffor the *fraggib*, in comparison with the last episode that almost scared me to death. He was having a calming effect on me now probably because he was being open about things.

“I thought it would be interesting to get in touch with you. I know you like learning new things. And you never know, one day I might be able to help you in some way.”

“Tell me what this ‘switching’ is about?”

“It’s about moving between *PPs*?”

“Really, that’s cleared it up for me then.”

“I like your sarcasm. It *is* sarcasm isn’t it? *PP* stands for Perception Point. How boring it must be for people staying on the one path all their lives.”

“I think it is less traumatic that way. I’m a person who likes change, but not when a plain, which is out there somewhere, suddenly turns into a scene from a frontier movie.”

“Yes, I pick up most of your meaning here, and I can see it was a bit startling for you.”

“I should get back to my friends. They will be worried about me going missing for so long.”

“Missing? But you are not missing. You are here.”

I could tell I was going to have some difficulty with Iffor when it came to simple human logic and what I would call normal arrangements of life.

“I’m sure they will be worried about me because of the time I’ve been away.” I explained.

“I think I understand your meaning of time. But don’t worry it isn’t used in ‘switching’.”

He had lost me.

“Can I go back to them now, please?” I said beginning to worry that if I stayed in one of these *PPs* for any length of time I might not be able to get back. I was thinking it might be like the wind changing when you are holding a silly face. It might stay that way forever. Are my thoughts becoming more abstract than normal?

“Do you want to ‘switch’ any more?” he asked me.

“Yes please, back to where I was.”

“Do you want to do this again sometime?” he asked.

“Maybe.” I replied.

“It can be fun.”

“Would you always return me back to where I was?”

“Of course, I swear on the word of a *fraggib*, if that is what you want?”

In an instant I was back under the ledge of rock and looking out at Keethe and Berte. I stood there repeating his words. "On the word of a *fraggib*." I walked back to the boys.

"Find anything interesting?" Keethe asked me.

"Did you?" I asked back.

"We found some old cow bones."

"Oh really. That is interesting."

"Sure is, it means there were once cows grazing on this plain." Berte said.

"Not cows but woolly animals like bison." I said, not really thinking.

"What? How would you know?" Keethe asked.

"It just came to me off the top of my head. Don't worry about it."

I looked at my watch. I thought it was later than it was.

I mumbled, "On the word of a *fraggib*, eh?"

"What?" Berte said.

"I'll tell you about it later. How about we return home? I don't know about you but I'm hungry."

"You can eat here. We saved you some?" said Keethe.

"Let's get back anyway." I said.

We got into the Endeavour and in no time at all were heading back to *Near Perfect*.

On the way I decided to tell the guys what had happened to me. I now know this was a mistake.

"But we could see you all the time. You weren't that far away from us you know," said Keethe.

"Is this another imaginary friend?" asked Berte.

"No, I am pretty sure it is the same one." I replied.

We hardly said anything else to each other on the trip home. On descent to land I asked the boys not to tell anyone about what had happened.

"Are you kidding?" said Berte. "I wouldn't be game to tell anyone that story."

They kept true to their word. Just occasionally when we were on our own, one of them would say something like, "How's your imaginary friend going?"

They were asking me this partly in jest but partly inquiring if I had seen him again, or thought I had. They were not sure what to think and neither was I for that matter. Over the next couple of weeks my friends seemed a little distant, understandable under the circumstances, I guess.

Chapter 20 The Quest to return to Earth

I didn't venture away from *Near Perfect* for the next two weeks. I was scared to meet up with Iffor again. I was sure I wouldn't see him in *Near Perfect* for some unknown reason. I know I had felt calm while with him the second time but I was frightened of the power he had at his disposal. I wasn't sure about his intelligence either. He didn't come across as being very bright and I didn't know his motives for doing things. I didn't know if he was a good person or *fraggib* in his case. In fact, I didn't know anything about him, other than he could whisk people off to places, at his will.

Peaterr was obsessed at getting back to Earth. He was going to pull the three spacecraft apart completely in the hope of being able to put together one that could reach Earth. I was pretty sure this was not going to work. I spoke to him but he wouldn't listen to me. Others in the group were also concerned that their means of transport around AZ would be destroyed by his attempts.

Dad became involved after talking to Peaterr. He spoke with him and they set up a panel of people to discuss Peaterr's plan. The panel was mainly made up of engineers. I was pretty sure we didn't have the technology to reach anywhere near the speed of light, which of course was what we would have to do now in order to get back to Earth in our lifetime. I wasn't chosen as a panel member because of my age, so it was frustrating for me trying to find out what was going on. However, Dad was on the panel and he would tell me most things, or anything I asked him. He would definitely not lie to me on *Near Perfect*.

Peaterr told them they could make a fast craft out of parts from all three spacecraft. He told them how the fins could be manufactured, but really manufacturing the fins was the easiest part of the process. Fins, that might concentrate gravity fields, would be useless without the device used to propel the craft along at multiples of light speeds.

The panel grew with the addition of a number of computer experts. Peaterr wanted to start dismantling spacecraft straight away, but the panel put a stop to that. They wanted to know more about how he expected things to work. Peaterr resigned from the group taking his plans with him. It looked like this would be the end of proceedings but strangely the panel stayed together to work all the issues through. When it came down to it they thought Peaterr's idea was a good one. I thought what else did all these people have to do with their time anyway? It was right for them to decide if something could be done to get back in touch with Earth.

Morale was quite high during this time, but there were exceptions. Peaterr had to be distracted in some way. I tried by suggesting we travel more in the *Endeavour* while it was still in one piece. This didn't interest him. I tried to interest him in walking but this had no effect. All he did was think about his family on Earth. There was no way of distracting him and he became depressed once more and locked himself away.

If I couldn't distract him then I had to try to get him to go back with the others. I asked Dad to persuade Peaterr to re-join the committee. He wasn't interested at first, thinking it would be more trouble than it was worth if every five minutes Peaterr would up and resign because someone said something he didn't agree with. However, after a week some of the engineers wanted Peaterr's input, so Dad went to see him. I

went along for moral support, I don't know if I was supporting Dad or Peaterr. Strangely Peaterr wanted to re-join the team. He hadn't told anyone this, but when he found out they couldn't get along without him he was happy to help out. It was a load lifted off his shoulders.

Because both Peaterr and Dad were now working full-time on the 'Return Project', as it was termed, I went back to my younger friends for company. Interestingly, they were planning another walk, this time slower, but for a longer time. They would take about two weeks and retrace the steps of our last walk, but this time both Berte and Keethe would do the extra stage that I had done alone. The scientists were interested in the 'bison' bones and wanted Berte and Keethe to go and look for more. They were impressed that they could be useful to the scientists. The scientists had also told them that if there were 'bison' bones out there, there would probably be bones of other animals.

I asked the boys if I could come along with them. In the past I wouldn't have needed to ask but they had been a bit distant from me ever since I told them about Iffor.

But straight away in unison they said, "Of course you can!"

With Berte saying, "We wouldn't be planning this walk if it hadn't been for our last one together. And we need you along to help us out. The only thing is; can we walk a little bit slower this time? We don't want it to be a race. We've given ourselves two weeks to do the same trip; with enough time in the middle for collecting bone samples."

"Sure. We can go slower. I don't mind." I replied.

In a couple of days we were off. We had pretty heavy packs to carry with two weeks supplies in them. But there were no complaints from anyone this time because the other two had done the organising. I'd never complain about a walk.

The only reservation I had was meeting up with Iffor. I was sure he would be out there somewhere waiting for me. Then I thought, maybe I'm putting too much importance on myself. Why would a *fraggib* hang around waiting for me? What was so important about me? He could 'switch' wherever he liked. He didn't need me. I also thought about how he had offered help if I needed him and how I had ignored him. I didn't know what sort of help he could give, all I knew was I wasn't very nice to him. In a way I had been looking for something just like Iffor, because I wanted to discover new things about AZ, but when I had found him I hadn't been very nice to him and was now ignoring him.

After a few days I was almost wishing I'd see him again. He'd probably scare me once again, but this time it would be okay if he did.

We arrived on the plain. It took a bit of climbing down rocks to get there and all three of us had cuts to our legs and arms. But after 6 days we were there. We went off in different directions gathering bones and looking for any other interesting things we could find. The scientists had given us light spades and specimen bags to put bones or anything else we found into. We could load up our packs to weigh the same as when we left *Near Perfect*. We had eaten half our ration of food now so we felt a lot lighter than when we started out.

I must have been right about Iffor. He hadn't hung around waiting for me. There was no sign of him. I even sat down in the same place as the last time I met him. Now

instead of being scared I was disappointed he wasn't there to 'switch' me to somewhere else.

Keethe, Berte and I found lots of bones. We collected as many different sized ones as we could. Keethe and Berte were digging holes all over the place. I was mostly scratching away at the surface. My heart wasn't into collecting bones. After a good morning's work, mostly on the part of the other two, I was getting lunch ready over near the rock ledge, when Berte found something. He called out excitedly and Keethe went over to him to see what it was and I followed slowly. He'd found something that looked very similar to a belt buckle, made of metal. We didn't know what type of metal it was, other than it was light in weight, and still had a shine to it when the dirt was rubbed off. It hadn't rusted at all. After removing as much dirt as he could Berte noticed a drawing scratched on it. It was a drawing of one of the beasts I had seen earlier. It was one of the hairy bison. I took one look and smiled.

"I told you these bones weren't from cows but hairy bison."

Both looked at me and nodded, not saying a word.

"This is a good find, eh?" said Berte.

We both nodded.

"The scientists will be pleased to see this." Keethe added.

We had lunch, and inspired by his find, Berte was back digging around for more relics in half an hour. Keethe followed him soon after. I didn't have the same enthusiasm. I had already seen what the plain had once looked like. I knew it had been a farm. However, I would have thought it belonged to the future and not the past because the sun had shone so brightly. There weren't clouds then like there were now. Iffor could answer my questions but where was he?

I cleared up after lunch and went for a walk, away from the boys and under the ledge where I had been when I saw Iffor before. I sat down and tried to see things in my mind using my ears and eyes to hear the faintest sound and see the slightest thing. But nothing happened. I felt sorry for not being friendlier to Iffor last time. This was why I was now missing out on seeing him. I was almost asleep when, wham! There I was in the cabin once more.

"Buzzer!" I exclaimed.

Standing next to me was Iffor.

"Buzzer? What is the meaning of this word?"

"It means finding you has given me a buzz or a good feeling." I answered.

"So you are happy to see me?"

"Yes I am, this time."

"That's good. I thought you might be because you came back to the same place as last time. I didn't know if I should bother you or not."

"You are no bother to me. I'm sorry for the way I acted last time. Can you explain more about 'switching' to me?"

"What would you like to know?" Iffor asked.

"Can you go anywhere anytime on this planet by switching?"

"I can go to any *PP*, that is 'perspective point' and they aren't governed by time or place."

"I'm a bit thick and don't understand this. For me going somewhere, especially from the *PP* of the plain to another *PP* of the plain means a change in time. You see

one of my friends just found a belt buckle with a sketch of one of the animals I saw the other day.”

“A gnitaek,” Iffor interrupted. (gnitaek is pronounced ‘nit teak’.)

“Probably. So to me when we ‘switched’ we went back in time to when gnitaek roamed the plain. That had to be earlier, because we found the buckle after it had been worn by someone or something, that used to live there but doesn’t any longer. Like the bones we’ve found. These bones belong to a time earlier than it was when I was on the plain just now.”

“I see what you are getting at but this is human logic. You think everything is in order of events.”

“But they have to be?”

“Your logic tells you that you live from a certain time to a certain time. Your perspective is finite. Your measurements are from your time of birth until your death and you know nothing of what goes on outside this, other than what others tell you. For me everything is accessible through *PPs*. There is no beginning or end for me. Time doesn’t exist when I move between points. I don’t have to wait for things to happen, I can just go there.”

Remember when my brain started to hurt back in *Near Perfect*? That had nothing on the headache I was getting now.

“But there has to be times involved because some things have not yet happened.”

“But they have! Everything has already happened,” explained Iffor. “You are just living through a very small part of it. I can see that you find this difficult but I can show you a few things.”

“Go ahead,” I encouraged him.

In an instant I was back on the plain with my hands over my eyes because of the bright sunlight, and I was feeling the heat. There were gnitaek out there stirring up dust, so much so that I began sneezing. I was waiting for the ‘God bless you’ from Iffor, then I remembered this was a human thing.

This time I could see what looked like people with the animals. They were tall and thin, wearing strange hats on their heads. These hats were pointed at the top and very high and had brims twice as wide as I’ve ever seen on a hat. The people had brown coloured cloth wrapped around them, and when one of them came closer to me I could see he was wearing a belt with a buckle just like the one Berte had found. The most amazing thing about these people was that they had bare feet, huge bare feet, not unlike the shape and size of the footprint I had seen when we first came to this continent.

Everything was happening around us with no one paying any attention to us being there with them.

“Can they see us?” I asked Iffor.

“No. Watch this.”

I was expecting to be whisked away to somewhere else but instead everything started to slow down. These people were rounding up their cattle in slow motion. And then a little while later they stopped completely. I could walk up to one of the ‘men’ and walk around him observing him more closely.

“Don’t start them up again just yet.” I was telling Iffor.

I ran to one of the gnitaeks. It was about twice the size of a cow with a very thick neck. It was dark brown and very hairy, even its face. It had wild looking eyes, also

brown and large. Its ears weren't very big but its legs were very muscular and it had feet like a camel. Dust was staying in the air just where it had been when everything stopped. I then realised how silent it was. I ran back to Iffor.

The picture started up again, going back to normal speed, then to a much faster one. All went dark and slowly the light returned. I realised part of a day and a whole night had passed. After this we must have 'switched' again because Iffor was standing next to me on the top of the rock ledge. Below me, instead of the grassy plain was a lake. It must have been very deep because the water was only 20 feet below the rock ledge.

Just as soon as I had taken this in we were back in the cabin. I was sitting on the chair and Iffor was, I think, sitting on the table. His vapour shape was bent and the lower half of him was swinging, a little like a person moving his legs back and forward.

"Does that explain anything to you?"

"That we went back in time or forward in time?" I asked.

"What about the slowing and the stopping?" Iffor asked.

"You can stop time?"

"No. What you have seen has nothing to do with time. These are events, which are not time dependent. We can go to the exact same spots now or anytime."

I could only see this as splitting hairs. I guess I couldn't really understand what he was getting at.

"All right then, where would you like to be?" he asked me.

"I think I'd like to be back with the boys right now and given a bit more time to think about things."

In an instant I was back on the plain. This time with Keethe and Berte who were digging away in the distance. I walked over to Keethe. I asked him if he had found anything else of interest. He said for me to give him time, he'd only just got started again after lunch. Berte came over and asked if everything was all right. I said nothing and they went back to their digging. After about an hour I gathered them together and said we should start making tracks for home. They disagreed with me and wanted to stay the night and then head off early in the morning. That was all right with me.

Later we were walking back to our campsite, which was just a place where we kept our gear.

As we walked I started to say, "I've seen"

And I was 'switched' mid-sentence, even mid-step, back into the familiar cabin with Iffor. This was making me dizzy. I don't know how many people would like being whisked away like this without warning and having their thoughts played around with so much. I was angry with Iffor this time.

"I want some warning when you are going to 'switch' me, okay?"

"That is something I can't do. I can't warn you."

"What about the time when you showed yourself as a shadow?"

"I guess I could do that."

"If you do that and then wait a minute, I'd feel better about 'switching' because I'd be better prepared. And if I don't want to be 'switched' I could say, don't do it now."

Iffor said nothing. I looked around the cabin and wondered what was outside. It was quiet out there. The cabin could have been suspended in space for all I knew.

“Keethe and Berte are going to know that I have disappeared this time. We were walking and talking together.”

“Kaavan?” said Iffor, for the first time addressing me by my name.

“Yes?”

“They won’t know you have gone. You have just stepped out of that *PP* into another. You’ll see what I mean when you go back. I asked you once before if there was somewhere you would like to go? Have you thought about that?”

“There is really only one place I’d like to go and then come back, but that’s Earth.”

“Do you want to go there now?”

“Are you serious? You can ‘switch’ me back to Earth?”

Just as I finished saying this I looked around and there were people walking past in strange-looking clothes. The men were wearing long coats and hats. The women were wearing long dresses down to their ankles. I rubbed my eyes as I looked across the wooden wharf I was standing on to see large sailing ships moored to it. I was just getting used to what I was hearing and seeing when I was again back in the cabin.

“Just a taste for now.”

“When was that?”

“It was a *PP* on Earth that is all I know.”

“Well it certainly wasn’t when I was living there.”

“Does that matter?”

“Do you think you could put me back on Earth when I was there? Even better put me back there in the year it is now so I can find out what has been going on over the last couple of years.”

“Of course but you will have to describe the scene for me in great detail or show me an image of it so I can see it in my mind.”

“Like a photograph?”

“Is that a representation of a scene? A good depiction?”

“A photograph is a photograph? I don’t know any other way to describe it. Wait on, a photograph is made by taking an image and having it show on paper or on a screen.”

“An accurate image.”

“If the photographer is any good it is.”

“Could you get me one?”

“Can you contact me in *Near Perfect* when I get back there?”

“Let’s pick a place where we can meet.”

“Why can’t you just ‘switch’ me out of *Near Perfect*?”

“It would be better for your concentration if you are a bit away from there and by yourself. How about meeting a kilometre east of *Near Perfect*? I can be there.”

“All right, when I get back I’ll get a photograph or two and bring them to you.”

Then of course without any warning I was switched back to Berte and Keethe. I didn’t miss a step as I walked along with them.

“...Iffor again. I thought I’d better tell you. In fact, I’ve just seen him a second time while we’ve been walking along.” I went on to say.

“What are you talking about? I didn’t see anything.” said Keethe.

“You’ve been with us all the time. I’m really starting to worry about you, Kaavan.”

WTS

Apart from the boys not believing me, the walk back with the bones to *Near Perfect* was uneventful. There was no way I could bring them around to believe me. Maybe Iffor could help me with that. He could reveal himself to them next time.

I was wondering about 'switching' and whether it could get us all back to Earth. I still needed to know more about it. At the moment there appeared to be some accuracy problems and Iffor really didn't know much about Earth. I wondered if he was just putting images into my brain and none of this was real after all. But that didn't explain seeing the gnitaeks on the plain and then finding their bones. That was real to Keethe and Berte. I guess I didn't know much at all.

Chapter 21 Asking Iffor for help

The first night back at *Near Perfect* I hardly slept. My mind was racing, thinking of so many things. A lot of ‘what ifs’ had come back into my head. My mind tried focussing on the scene I was in when I was back on Earth, the sailing ships and the people. I think it must have been in the early 19th century. I dosed off and probably dreamt about living in that time but woke up soon after. I couldn’t remember any details of a dream. Then I thought why couldn’t Iffor appear to me here at *Near Perfect*? This was such a good place. Was Iffor not a good *fraggib*? He certainly seemed to be just as nice as the people around here. I needed to find out more about him. What if all of us were ‘switched’ to Earth and then found others couldn’t see us? What would be the point of that?

I must have finally got to sleep because not long after I realised it was light outside. I thought about going to James and asking him about Iffor and see if he knew anything about *fraggibs*, or anything else he would like to tell me. But instead, I decided to look for a few photographs on my computer. I printed two off and told the others I was going for a walk. I headed off with some water.

After about a kilometre I found a rock and sat down. I concentrated on the area around me but before I could really get into it I was ‘switched’ to the cabin.

“Hello, Kaavan, what have you got for me?”

“I thought you were going to warn me before you ‘switched’ me from now on?”

“Hello, Iffor, how are you today?” said Iffor. “That is what a person would say if he didn’t get a greeting, isn’t it?”

“Probably,” I replied. “Sorry, I was rude.”

I handed him the photographs. That is I tried to but couldn’t really make out where his hands were. In the end I just put them on the table beside him. He appeared to be looking at them. It was hard to tell what he was doing.

“Mmmm. These are good,” he said.

One of the photos was of my mother cooking dinner in the kitchen of our house on Earth. I was in the background. Dad had taken it. There was a clock on the wall reading 6:30. The other was a picture of me in a library. Borg had taken this one. I had my computer open on the desk and was turning around, smiling and looking at the camera.

“Do you want to go to one of these places now?” asked Iffor.

“Can you do that?”

“I’ll count to three; one, two, three.”

“I’m still here, Iffor!” I exclaimed.

“But you have been and returned,” he replied.

“What?”

“You don’t remember do you?”

“Remember what?”

Iffor explained, “I thought as much. You don’t remember going there because you were part of the *PP* when you were on Earth.”

“Then how will I know that you can do what you say if I can’t remember anything that happened when I get back?” I asked.

“You won’t. If you go to a *PP* that belongs to your lifespan you won’t remember what happened before you were ‘switched’ nor will you remember being there when ‘switched’ back.”

How could I trust Iffor after this explanation? He said I’d been somewhere but I couldn’t remember being there. Although it sounded like a good explanation, I would never know if he was telling me the truth? If he wanted to fool me he was being quite clever, I thought to myself. I would have to give this some more thought.

“Does this mean if I was switched to Earth, as you did just now, and stayed there I’d have no memories of ever being in *AZ*?”

“None at all, except you might remember small things if similar events take place. This is what your people call *deja vu*.”

I thought I’d give Iffor a difficult question.

“You know how you said you might be able to help me?”

“Yes.”

“I might have a huge favour to ask you. If you are able to, could you ‘switch’ all the people on *AZ* who came from Earth back to Earth?”

“That’s not a huge favour. It would be very easy to do.”

“Then how come you needed a photograph from me to do the last ‘switch’? Wouldn’t you need a photograph from each of them and do this?”

I thought I had him with this question.

“Not at all. Your photograph put you into that *PP*. All the others when ‘switched’, would fit into theirs alongside yours.”

“If that’s right it means ‘switching’ is time dependent. I don’t think you can have it both ways.”

“See your photographs there? Are they here now?”

“Yes but they are of a former time.”

“But they are here now. You have two images of former times here. It is the same with *PPs*. They are images. I could have put you back into either of the *PPs* depicted by these photographs. It isn’t a matter of time. You are in both photographs here on the table at the same time.”

We were both silent for a few moments.

Then Iffor said, “Why would you want all your people ‘switched’ to one of these *PPs*? How would this help you? If I put you back in this picture and the others back into their place, you would just re-live what has already happened.”

Iffor was right I hadn’t thought of that. Putting people back didn’t change what would happen. There had to be some way we wouldn’t be stuck in *AZ* like we were now.

“Can you put us back on Earth outside our *PPs*?”

“Yes, I could but you wouldn’t be seen by anyone there, nor would you be able to enter into anything that was happening on Earth. You would be invisible and a lot like me really.”

“But you aren’t invisible, and I can hear you.”

“Do you know how much work it takes to make this fuzzy image you see and to have you hear me? It is only because you made yourself susceptible to seeing and hearing new things that I could get in touch with you. And we are talking about *AZ* and not Earth.”

“Then there is a real problem. I would like everyone to go back now and warn people about what has taken place here so they don’t make the same mistakes.”

“You can’t imagine how many people want to do this; live their lives over so they don’t make the same mistakes, but they do over and over again.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“You are asking me this time? That’s good. I have lots of ideas. But do you have any more ideas yourself? Maybe you could come up with something.”

I did have one idea.

“I was thinking you could ‘switch’ me to a time earlier than my life-span so I can leave a message or something that would warn people in the future not to go on this voyage. If that doesn’t work, is there a way we could change the way people aboard the *Investigator* think so they won’t leave us behind on AZ? By the way, why won’t you ‘switch’ me from *Near Perfect*? Why do I have to go out from there before you contact me?”

“I think I’ve told you that before. You need to be able to concentrate. However, there is another reason. I have to be a bit careful around *Delight*, not because I am against what they are doing or that they are against me. We are both working for the good of everyone and no one in *Delight* or me would ever intentionally hurt anyone else. I just know that those in *Delight* would love to keep you at *Near Perfect*. There is nothing wrong with that. It is a great place for you to live. But I don’t think you belong there. You have your own lives to live. You need to find out that helping others is what life is really about. This is the only way to get satisfaction out of what you do.”

It sounded like Iffor was telling the truth and it all seemed perfectly logical to me but I still had a little doubt in the back of my mind that something wasn’t quite right.

“What do you think of my ideas then? I mean about somehow getting in touch with people before they take off for AZ?”

“They are very logical human answers to the problem you have. Both of them are all right from your perspective. But from my perspective, which is all perspectives, they lack some basic understanding.”

“Then you tell me.”

“I want you to see how things really work so you will truly understand. Now you keep talking about time and I know why you do this. But think of it this way. If it is possible to know how things turn out now, how can these be changed?”

This was a good question and one that many people on Earth would like an answer to. There were so many books about time travel. Maybe I was going to find the answer to how people could make changes in the past that change the future.

“Forget time,” Iffor continued, “Think of what actually happens. You know what happened in your life, you came to AZ and now need help getting back to Earth. Why haven’t you asked me if there are *PPs* that have you back on Earth?”

I hadn’t thought of that. He could tell me what actually happened. But did I want to know about my future? He might tell me I died here and so did all the others. And I’d then know everything that was going to happen. This might be good but it also might be very depressing news.

“Maybe I don’t want to know what happens.” I said to Iffor.

“Things are actually a lot more complicated but I don’t need to tell you about them right now. We can discuss these later.”

“What do you suggest I do then?” I asked.

“If I were you I would want to go to a *PP* on earth that is outside my lifespan but not on the side you are talking about but the other side. Remember if you aren’t in the *PP* then you will remember when you are ‘switched’ back.”

“How come if I’m not meant to remember things when ‘switched’ back I remember things I have lived through on *AZ*? Can you answer that? I was on the rock ledge and on the plain. I remember them clearly.”

“You are starting to use your brain. On *AZ* this can be done because you don’t belong to *AZ*. On Earth it can’t because that is where you really belong. I have never belonged to Earth so I just drop you off there. I wasn’t with you when you visited Earth before.”

I hadn’t thought either way but I didn’t have any recollection of him being with me when I was looking at the sailing ships.

I really needed some help to work this all out and Iffor was confusing me.

“To come back to *AZ* from one of your *PP*s would appear to you like the blink of an eye, in fact it would appear even quicker because there is no time involved, like I have already explained.”

This was way too complex for me but I could work out that if I went back to Earth outside my lifespan I could maybe find out something that happened while we were on *AZ*. There might be news of our travel.

“Want to do some research?” asked Iffor. “I take it that in this photograph you are in a place where you can do this. What if I put you there in another *PP* so you can do some research on your voyage?”

Amazing, we were thinking along the same line of thought.

“All right,” I said.

“One, two, three.”

I was in the library and looking around. There were very few people in this room and not many books on shelves. I know that when I left Earth paper books were dwindling because of e-books and readers. There were a couple of metal display shelves with brochures in them. I picked up one, which was advertising a book reading for January 2181. I know knew that in 2181 I wouldn’t be alive. What I didn’t know was how far advanced from my death this time was.

I could see someone looking over in my direction. I think it was a librarian. I wondered if she could see me. I dropped the leaflet and it fell to the floor. She came over and picked it up and put it back on the shelf. She obviously couldn’t see me but she must have seen the leaflet fall from my hands. I would have to be careful holding things or moving things if people were watching.

I had more of a walk around. I went into a research room. There were a few people in there working on computers. I went over to one not being used. The other people couldn’t see the screen from where they were sitting and they seemed engrossed in what they were doing in any case.

I slowly pulled the chair out and sat down in front of the terminal. The touch screen included newspapers in its menu. Under the menu in a dropdown were dates and topics. I found an article about the *Investigator’s* departure. This was very exciting seeing information about our voyage after we had left Earth.

I didn’t know how long Iffor would let me stay here, so I worked as fast as I could, keeping an eye on the others to see if I remained transparent to them. All was

going well. I had to be careful that in my concentration I didn't do something that would appear out of the ordinary for those around me.

I looked forward a number of years after the report of our departure and found nothing. There was no report of its return and I checked 10 and 20 years on. This must mean the *Investigator* after leaving AZ hadn't made it back to Earth. I'm sure there would have been articles on this. If the departure had been newsworthy then its return would have been, especially if most of the people, who had taken off in it had not returned. There would have been reports from the Captain and others with excuses why so few had made it back to Earth.

After a great deal of searching I found there had been two memorial services for the people aboard the *Investigator*, after the fifth and sixth year anniversary of its Departure and that was all. I found it sad that I couldn't find anything else. It was going back a long way in time in a person perspective but even so I would have expected to find more information on the subject.

In all, I was on Earth for about half an hour, according to the wall clock, before Iffor 'switched' me back to AZ.

"Find anything out?" he asked me.

"Not much but enough. I'm now almost certain the *Investigator* didn't make it back to Earth. We didn't seem to be missed very much."

"That is the lot of a person. Not many people are remembered over time. You have to be really newsworthy to be remembered more than one generation. I can tell you that the *Investigator* didn't make it back. The pressure on skin was too much and it disintegrated not long after leaving AZ."

"And you could have told me this earlier?"

"As I said, there are some things you need to find out for yourself."

"Are there other things you could tell me and save time?"

"Depends on what you want to know."

"What is the point of all this. I was thinking earlier that I could do something to warn people against taking the voyage but that wouldn't work because that wasn't what actually happened. You know the future already. How can anything change that?"

"It can't. Nothing can change that perspective. But that isn't the only perspective we have. There are others. One is that your Dad said no to your family going on the voyage. In fact, he didn't even tell you he was asked to go. You never knew you were listed on the *Investigator's* manifest. I could 'switch' you to that perspective but it would be useless because you wouldn't remember the events when I 'switched' you back. There is another one. I'll show you. Are you ready for a 'switch'?"

"I suppose so."

"One, two, three."

I was sitting at the terminal in the library on Earth once again. I looked around to see one person I'd seen before and he was wearing the same clothes as last time. The others looked unfamiliar. I conducted the same search pattern again. I found the same departure article of the *Investigator* but later, the papers were full of articles on the *Investigator's* return to Earth. They told of the hardships faced on the return voyage and how it had been a miracle the *Investigator* had held out for so long. It had suffered major structural damage while travelling light speeds, but the Captain had

taken his time to reach these speeds. He had then nursed the cruiser through the slow up rate until it stopped in Earth's orbit.

A scientific paper showed that this vessel was in no fit state for further travel. In fact, it was destroyed soon after its arrival. Not all had made the passage back to Earth. Some had died from *Atom Meiser* failure, which had caused these people to suffer food poisoning.

Another human-interest article referred to some staying on in *AZ*. It described the different societies on that planet. It also suggested that attempts should be made to re-visit the planet in the not too distant future.

From these newspaper articles I couldn't find out who had actually returned and who had stayed on in *AZ*. I'm sure if I had more time I could have gone to the space voyage records. I could also have found out how many and who had died on the return voyage. In some respects I'm glad I couldn't see this just now.

Again I would have been in the library roughly half an hour before Iffor 'switched' me back to *AZ*.

"What are you trying to tell me here?" I asked him. "How can different things happen in the future? Surely there is only one future?"

"A person only follows one path but there are many paths that can be followed and that is how the future can be changed. It is like a maze but in the end only one true course a person goes down. I can see all the different paths and how they would turn out if used."

"I'm sorry but I don't understand. Is what you have just shown me on Earth not real? Did you just show me what could have happened?"

"In a way, but it is still real. All you saw was real. What I'm trying to explain is, that even though it is impossible to go back and change events and alter the path of history, it is possible to see all the possible paths and jump from one to the other. In the end it is the path that a person takes that is important. It is his or her path that shows the actual journey through life. So what we do in life is very important. The decisions we make can affect everything we do later on in life. But there is always a record of what would have happened 'if'."

I think I was beginning to understand what Iffor was on about.

"So what you are saying is that you can't go back in time to change an event but by 'switching' you can jump to another path which really amounts to the same thing."

"You are getting very close to understanding. There is really an ideal path for everyone. No ordinary person has ever achieved the best result in life. All have made mistakes that affect their future. And yes, it is possible to 'switch' paths."

"Then it is possible to keep 'switching' paths so a person lives a perfect life."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"For most people 'switching' would have to take place every few seconds and even though you could say it is achievable it wouldn't be practical. There are other things beyond a person's control. We have been talking about a person's decisions which, doesn't take into account interactions such as, disease or accidents, in fact any other external factors. When we lump these together we couldn't possibly switch enough to achieve perfection and what sort of life would we be living by switching all the time. Apart from this, it wouldn't help anyone in the learning process, which is what life is all about."

“I don’t suppose there would be much benefit in mechanically getting your life correct if you didn’t really live it that way. You would become a machine or a computer following a preconceived path.”

“This is exactly the point. Everyone should be responsible for the things they do. They don’t always get it right but in most cases this isn’t harmful to them. It is the way a person lives that is important and not whether he or she does everything right all of the time. You can do something wrong that hurts someone but you can say you are sorry for doing it. It doesn’t change the fact that you have done the thing but it can make up for it in some way. You will learn that it is your attitude that is the important lesson in life.”

“Attitude?”

I knew what attitude was, but didn’t know what Iffor was getting at here.

“It is another reason why ‘switching’ wouldn’t work to keep a person on the correct path. Even thoughts affect the way we live. Imagine having to correct every thought we make? However, we can learn attitude and we do this by looking at the way others live.”

“I think I understand. James and his family have taught me a lot. They are so nice and they just want to help people.”

“Then you can see how their attitude has had a good effect on you. And I want to help you out if I can.”

I was thinking earlier that I wanted to go back to a time before the voyage happened, but now I was not so sure. If I did I wouldn’t remember the experiences I had. I may never get to know Peaterr, Berte or Keethe. I wouldn’t have had the bad experiences of that dreadful *Chance Your Luck* and most of all experienced the way James and his family live, always thinking of others. Do I give up all this to go back to a life before AZ?

As I was thinking this Iffor said,

“You really have a lot of things to think about. If you go to another path you won’t remember any of this and not gain from your experiences. However, you would be back on Earth with your friends and not stuck here on AZ. But you would have learned other things that you haven’t learned here.”

“I can’t imagine anything on Earth for a 13 year old boy being as exciting as what has happened to me here.”

“I think you are right.”

“I want to take these memories back with me. I want to be able to tell people the differences between AZ and Earth. Most of all I want the others from the *Investigator* to be back on Earth, even those who took off without us.”

We agreed I should go back to *Near Perfect* and think some more. I asked Iffor whether he would be happy meeting Keethe and Berte.

He replied, “I bet you are getting some strange comments from them.”

“You are my imaginary friend.”

Iffor laughed and straight away I was by myself again. I was walking back to *Near Perfect* thinking that Iffor hadn’t agreed to show himself to my friends when a shadowy figure appeared and said,

“Next time.”

WTS

NOTE: There are two remaining chapters. To read these you will need to go online and read them from there. The remaining chapters are:

Chapter 22 Seeing is believing and

Chapter 23 The Final Switch

The reason for reading these chapters online is to give you the feeling of what it will be like to read a book in the 22nd Century. If you don't already have it you will need to download 'Flash' software.

You might also like to flip through the pages online and view the images.