

'Caswell goes from strength to strength
with his writing.' *Reading Time*

BRIAN
CASWELL

THE
DREAMS
OF THE
CHOSEN

BOOK 3 IN THE DEUCALION SEQUENCE



Since 1989, Brian Caswell has written 31 books including the best-selling *A Cage of Butterflies*. His work has received numerous awards and shortlistings, including the Children's Peace Literature Award, the Vision Australia, Young Adult Audio Book of the Year Award, the Aurealis Award, the Australian Multicultural Children's Literature Award, the Human Rights Award, the NSW Premier's Literary Awards (four times) and he has been included in the prestigious International Youth Library 'White Ravens' list four times. All his published novels have been listed as Notable Books by the Children's Book Council of Australia.

He also researches and designs 'cutting-edge' educational and personal development programs, listens to all kinds of music (usually far too loud), watches 'an excessive number' of movies and DVDs, and reads 'anything with words on it'. Brian lives on the NSW Central Coast with his wife Marlene, and his dog, Indy. He has four children and 13 grandchildren.

Deucalion Series

Deucalion

The View from Ararat

Young Adult

Merryll of the Stones

Dreamslip

A Cage of Butterflies

A Dream of Stars (short stories)

Asturias

Double Exposure

Loop

By Brian Caswell and David Phu Au Chiem

Only the Heart

The Full Story

Younger Readers

Mike

Lisdalia

Maddie

Relax Max!

Alien Zones Series

Teedee and the Collectors or How It All Began

Messengers of the Great Orff

Gladiators in the Holo-Colosseum

Gargantua

What Were the Gremnholz Dimensions Again?

Whispers from the Shibboleth

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UQP

*For Marlene – who keeps her time-traveller
anchored securely in the present.*

We do not choose

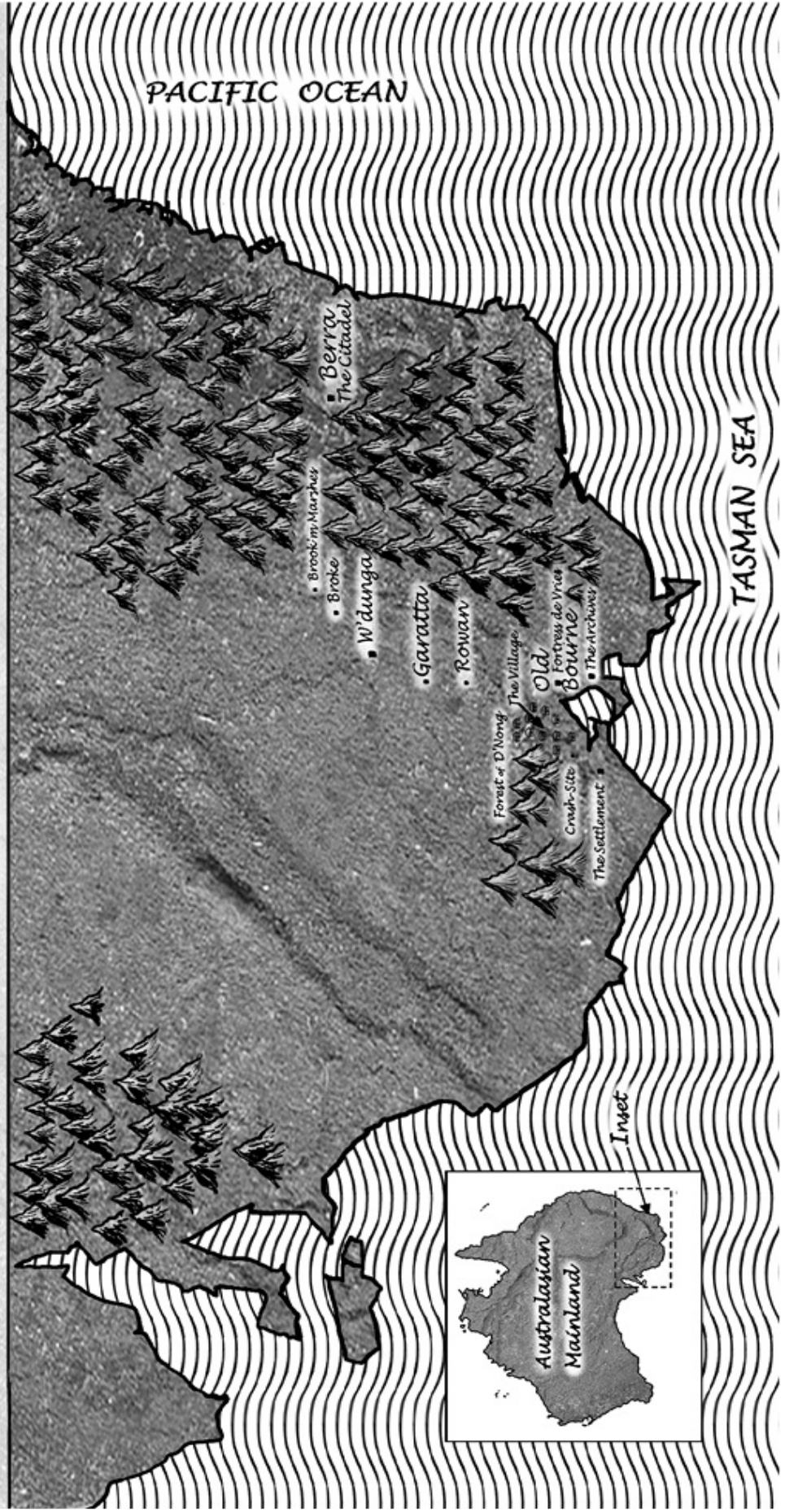
We are chosen.

*We do not own the Dream
We borrow it from the Universe.*

*Saebi t-Aiby-el-Rhae
Thoughtsong of the Returning Canto 7*

Mainland Australasia (South East Sector) - circa

3382AD



PROLOGUE

BEFORE THE COMING OF THE NIGHT

I don't know what kind of weapons will be used in the third world war . . . But I can tell you what the fourth world war will be fought with – stone clubs. Albert Einstein

Wolfram/Lee/Sumitomo
Data-Control Facility, Melbourne
Republic of Australasia, Southeast Sector
July 18, 2456AD

AIDAN

‘What the—’ Aidan Tan pushes back slightly from the screen-wall, though the tips of his fingers remain in contact with its liquid plasma surface. The words – and the movement – are a pre-conscious flinching, as if the sudden gibberish that has replaced the ordered flow of information across the huge display somehow threatens a physical hurt.

All along the screen-wall, technicians and program analysts, graphic designers and data-processors are moving their wheeled stools back from their posts, staring up at the display. Puzzled expressions, whispered queries, some colourful language, even a bemused smile or two. Faces bathed in the bluish radiance of the wall, watching the meaningless strands of digital code peter out until the display is blank. A deep blue empty field, shimmering with an ambient sense of motion suspended.

Perched behind the control desk at the edge of a mezzanine platform overlooking the work floor, Den Rodriguez looks down at the thirty-seven people on her shift, then back up at the screen-wall, then down at the array of smaller screens ranged around her on the console: the ones she uses to track the progress of individuals as they play their part in the organic whole. The screens glow as blue as the wall, empty as the wall, and for the first time in her working life Den Rodriguez knows fear.

For the blue screen is an impossibility. Connected as it is to the planet-wide corporate network that forms the beating heart of Wolfram/Lee/Sumitomo, it is a small, but integral part of a living entity that feeds on data, giving and receiving a trillion trillion bytes of information every second, blending and measuring every finger-stroke on every W/L/S screen across the entire face of the planet.

It cannot simply be blank, any more than a waking brain can be.

Slowly, she becomes aware that sometime in the past minute she has stopped breathing, and the realisation shocks her. Down below, her team has fallen uncharacteristically silent. They stand, staring up at the blue of the screen. No one speaks, because no one can find the words.

Somewhere beneath the confusion, a quiet electronic bleat registers, and a flashing red telltale draws her gaze from the screens. She touches a comm-square on the console and a man's face appears on the surface of the desk in front of her.

‘Henry.’ She hears the break in her own voice. ‘What the hell's going on?’

Before he can answer, the image on the desktop flickers once and disappears and the surface returns to opaque black.

‘Henry?’ She repeats the name stupidly to her own reflection and slams her open palm down hard on the desktop. ‘Shit! *SHIT!*’

‘Denise?’ Aidan has moved up behind her. The unspoken question is phrased in the raising of an eyebrow and a tiny lifting of his shoulders.

She replies to his reflection in the dead screen. ‘How the hell do *I* know, Aid? First the wall; then the

comm. It's like—'

'A meltdown?'

'No. I – I don't know.' She stands and moves across to the small window that breaks the grey monotony of the wall behind her, looking down one hundred and twenty storeys towards the street invisible in the haze below. 'You don't think maybe the rumours—'

Aidan shakes his head. 'What? First Strike? Surely they couldn't be that stupid. Could they?'

'Couldn't they?'

A sudden movement above the roofline of the next building catches her attention. A commercial flyer painted in the orange and black livery of Pan Pacifica has erupted from a bank of dark cloud on a trajectory that threatens to send it crashing into the roof of the tower opposite.

Caught by her reaction, Aidan has moved up beside her at the window in time to see the flyer lurch erratically, as the pilots struggle for control.

For a moment, it appears that the manoeuvre has succeeded. The flyer clears the rooftop and begins a slow shuddering climb, but then the nose dips and it dives. Directly towards them.

Instinctively, Aidan throws a protective arm around Den's shoulder and drags her away from the window. Half a second later, the crippled flyer strikes the building further up, and the explosion that accompanies the impact buckles the floor beneath their feet and tears at the solid skin of the structure.

The wall, the small window and part of the floor disappear in a Niagara of shattered Plascrete, steel and glass that hurtles with murderous force towards the street hundreds of metres below, and among the rubble a woman falls, screaming, eyes impossibly wide, hands like rigid claws, clutching at the air as she passes.

Then she is gone and the winter wind gusts around them. The rolling thunder of the explosion echoes back from the windows opposite. They reflect the billowing orange of the fireball and the wound growing in the face of the stricken building, as the skin of its façade is peeled away.

'Come on!' he shouts, his words torn away by the wind.

They step back carefully, hand in hand, away from the cracked and ragged edge of the Plascrete slab.

Inside the room, no one else has moved. The entire shift stands in stunned silence, staring up at the devastation.

'Come on!' she screams. 'Let's get the hell out!'

In the hallway, the lights flicker and fail and, for a moment, there is pitch black. And a gut-deep primal fear that closes like a fist around the heart.

Then the emergency lighting cuts in, a dull orange glow barely more comforting than the dark.

Someone tries the elevator button, but it remains stubbornly unlit.

'Looks like we hoof it.' Aidan whispers the words from close behind her, as if he is afraid to voice them to the crowd in the elevator lobby.

'It's a hundred and twenty storeys,' she replies.

'And won't get any less for the waiting. We may as well start.'

'Couldn't we just wait until—'

'Until what? Until they turn the power back on?' He draws her aside, whispering the words quietly while watching the others hover uncertainly around the elevator shaft doors. 'Think, Den. It's a system crash on a scale we don't dare imagine. And if the cause is what I suspect, they won't be turning the power back on for a very long time. Now come on, we have a long climb down ahead of us.'

The stairwell is dimly lit and shrouded in shadows. She stumbles on the first step and he catches her before she falls.

‘Only a couple of thousand to go.’

The joke is weak, but she smiles despite herself.

‘Just don’t go counting them down,’ she says, ‘or I’ll have to kill you.’

At the next landing, she pauses and checks the chrono on her wrist. The display glows orange.
16:15:23.

She counts the seconds off in her mind. In less than two hours it will be dark.

Less than two hours.

Her hand is shaking and she feels the fear beading on her forehead and running down her face. Angry at her weakness, she grabs the hand to stop it trembling and breathes in deeply.

Get a grip. You’re losing it.

Aidan stops three steps below her and turns, making his way back up to where she stands. They lean against the wall, out of the steady stream of foot traffic that is beginning to flow down the stairwell.

‘We’ll be okay,’ he whispers, placing his hands around hers. ‘Trust me.’

Her eyes shift down to his hands, then back up to his face. His stare is confident and uncompromising, and something in it makes her believe him.

Then the door beside them opens, and a girl of sixteen or seventeen inches nervously through, watching it close behind her, like the gate of a prison cell. The photo ID on her tunic is a poor likeness. Samantha Pickford.

Aidan holds her gaze and attempts a smile. ‘Going our way, Samantha?’

But the girl doesn’t answer. She is biting her lip as she begins the long journey down.

Wolfram/Lee/Sumitomo

World Head Office, Atlanta, GA

Former United States, Southeast Sector

July 18, 2456AD

CYRUS

The old man sits alone in the dark room. His hands are white shapes, the bronze horse on the desk before him barely more than an ill-defined shadow.

The office door swings open and the beam of a glo-lamp cuts the darkness, playing across the floor as it moves towards him.

Simon Henley pauses a couple of metres from the desk, a shadow behind the room’s new source of illumination. For a moment the younger man remains silent, unmoving. Then he speaks.

‘Well, Cyrus?’

‘We couldn’t have known,’ the old man begins, but there is no conviction in the statement.

‘It was in the bloody report! We should have taken more—’

‘The *minority* report! A couple of dissenting opinions—’

‘That happened to be *right*. What the hell are we going to do?’

‘*Do*, Simon?’ Cyrus Hamilton the Fourth stands and moves towards his second in command, taking hold of the glo-lamp. ‘There’s nothing we *can* do. It’s too late. The world’s about to go all to hell, and the poor bastards won’t even know why.’

‘Christ! How could we have been so *stupid*?’ Henley rubs a hand across his face, struggling to keep himself from slamming his fist down on the polished perfection of the desk.

Hamilton’s voice is steady and without discernable emotion. ‘How could we *not*?’

He turns towards the desk and opens the small antique showcase, which takes pride of place at the centre near the front edge. Then he pauses for a moment, looking down at the masterpiece it contains.

In the light from the glo-lamp, it shines, silver and perfect, and he runs a finger along the barrel and

over the polished ivory of the handle, before placing the lamp onto the desk and picking it up.

~~‘The Colt 45.’ The reverence in his manner is unnerving. Cyrus Hamilton is not one to reveal anything but a favourable profit-and-loss statement. He holds the gun out to Simon, cradled carefully in both hands, an artefact of great value and beauty. ‘You know how old this is?’~~

Simon Henley shakes his head, lost in the horror of what has occurred, yet fascinated by the old man’s unnatural calm.

Cyrus continues as if he had not really expected an answer. ‘Almost six hundred years. Six centuries. And it’s still perfect. When it was made, most of the great cities were small towns still. There was no electricity, and no flyers. And no law – except this.

‘We were a frontier people then and America was a dangerous place.’ A small sound escapes – half sigh, half resigned chuckle. A slight shaking of the head, then the mask of calm is in place again. ‘Strange the way the world turns.’

Finally, anger supplants fear. For the first and last time in his career, Simon Henley raises his voice to his superior. ‘For God’s sake, Cyrus, stop being cryptic and focus! What are we going to do?’

The old man moves around the desk and sits back down in the chair. His gaze is still fixed on the treasure in his hands.

‘*We?* *We* are not going to do anything. *You*, my dear Simon, are going to take that lamp and get the hell out of my office. Go home and kiss your wife. See if she still remembers who you are. Get to know your kids, while you still can. Me, I’m going to sit here alone for a while in the dark.’

The younger man hesitates.

He is looking down at a stranger with Cyrus Hamilton’s face. Finally, he takes the light, turns around and leaves the room.

Like a man waking from an already half-forgotten dream, Simon Henley looks around him. The huge office is empty, the screen-walls and the data displays dead and dark.

He is vaguely aware of the bloody glow of sunrise, cresting the jagged skyline, as he takes the first steps towards the exit and disappears into a dangerous and uncertain future.

From the closed office that he has left behind come the dull explosion of an ancient weapon and the sound of a body falling.

PART ONE

THE HANGING CHORD

How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations!
Lamentations 1

ORPHANS

Expeditionary Ether-Shuttle *Cortez*
 in geo-stationary orbit above Al-Baada, Deucalion
 15/14/1008 Standard (Jump-Day minus eight)

ERIN'S STORY

It was like being back in school.

Part of our mission was to share, with anyone we might find alive, the history of our planet over the past thousand years. After all, we'd probably be as much of a mystery to them as they were to us.

But what is history?

For me, it had never been about big moments and personalities. The history of Deucalion had always been about understanding ourselves. What it meant to be part of '*a race transplanted*' – as the Elok thought-poet Saebi had once described us.

I wasn't the mission historian – far from it. There were crew members far better suited to that role than I was – but as the one who would be making first contact, I needed to be able to explain *us* to anyone who might need to understand. And that meant getting a handle on what it was that was understood about being Deucalian.

A race transplanted. I liked the phrase. It resonated with something my father had told me a few days before he died.

– *Erin, he sent, fighting to keep the Shield in place and mask the pain. You know I'm proud of you, don't you?*

I'd nodded, fighting back tears.

I knew that part of what I felt was leaking out past the Shield, but there are some emotions that no amount of Etiquette training can help you control. And I wasn't sure that I wanted to anyway.

– *And I know your mother would have been proud too,* he went on, sending out a subtle wave of warmth and support, as he put into words some emotions of his own. *I mean, you know I didn't want you signing on for the mission in the first place, but I want to tell you . . . I'm glad you did.*

For centuries, we've been like orphans, cut off from our past, and filling the gap with speculation. Now we have the opportunity to close that gap – to make contact with Earth. And if there was anyone I'd choose to show them the best of what we've become – what we've built, and how this world has changed us – it would be you.

When I start to question why I ever let myself get involved in this whole thing, I remember him lying there, and it helps me put the doubts to rest.

So what was I doing? In between supervising the preparations and going through the mind-numbing training schedules, I was poring over all my old study notes – anything to do with history, politics and what made Deucalian society tick.

I scrolled down the screen, until I reached a thought-cube interview with Eleanora De Buiss.

She was probably the most famous historian of the eighth century, which was a period when we'd 'rediscovered' a lot of our early history. Not that it had ever been lost, exactly. I guess people had just lost interest. Professor De Buiss had almost single-handedly rekindled that interest.

The interview had been titled *The Children of Icarus*, and I guess it summed up a lot of what I'd wanted to share with anyone seeking what it meant to grow up Deucalian. She began with a statement that had stuck with me since the first time I read it, at the age of seven or eight.

It seems unthinkable today, but telepathy was once a feared and dangerous ability for anyone to possess on Deucalion.

Fear of telepathy.

I remember in school, when the tutor tried to explain to us a world in which people could not share mind to mind, it made no sense, like an entire race with no sight or no hearing. How could they exist? But they had. For the vast majority of human history, all men had been deaf to the thoughts of others.

It was a hard concept to get my eight-year-old head around.

We were Icaran, but it had not always been so, and it was important to remember the fact especially where we were going.

Professor De Buiss had spent a lifetime studying what it meant to be a telepath in an intolerant world – and though her account had ended with the Separation, her insights put what we were about to attempt into perspective.

I guess we had come full-circle.

The Separation. The reason for our mission.

Whatever happened back on Earth all those centuries ago was at least as serious as the Crystal Deaf had been on our world. What else could have caused the Separation?

It was our job to solve the mystery and explain the past.

Which didn't mean I needed Hanni's endless gushing into my ear. The thing is, there's a time for enthusiasm and there's a time for plain old-fashioned hard work. Unfortunately, for some people Hanni in particular – the distinction has always been a little blurred. Sometimes, working with him is like living with an excitable six-year-old duck-stomping around inside your head.

Enthusiasing.

– . . . *a thousand years*, he continued. *Almost to the day. I mean, don't you think it's like an omen? That's if you believe in omens – which, of course, I don't. But you have to admit it is a pretty amazing coincidence. Exactly a thousand years since they sent the first warp-shuttle back to Earth from Deucalion, and here we are, preparing to make the first Ether-Jump. I mean—*

And on, and on.

Hanni *loved* to discuss history, even when there was serious work to be done.

Of course, if he didn't love it, he wouldn't have been on the crew at all. But it did get under your skin sometimes.

I dropped the mind-shield a touch and let my impatience leak out. Just enough to tickle his awareness, but not insult him. It was our unspoken agreement and nine times out of ten it worked.

He smiled at me self-consciously and stopped rambling.

– *I'm doing it again, aren't I?*

I smiled back.

– *Sorry, Hanni. It's just—*

– *I know, boss. There's a lot to do.*

Embarrassment tinged his thoughts. I could feel it, though I don't think it was an intentional leak. Hanni wasn't rude, just naturally over-emotional. Always had been. It drew no end of polite criticisms from the Etiquette tutors, the whole time we were growing up.

Belatedly, I tried to soften the blow.

– *It's not like that, Han, really. I mean, if it wasn't for history, we wouldn't be making the trip in the first place, would we? The mother-planet. The source of half our culture and all that. Who wouldn't want to know what happened back there?*

Enough said. It didn't pay to try too hard – even with Hanni.

~~Especially with Hanni, even though he invited it. He was emotional, but definitely not stupid.~~

I turned back to the supply terminal and continued the inventory check.

That night, as I was undressing alone in my cabin, the black fears began to rise again.

Totally irrational. It was months too late for any of us to back out, without jeopardising the whole mission – and that was the last thing I would ever do. But that didn't stop the panic attacks.

Fear isn't logical. It's a survival trait, hard-wired into our genes. Fear of the dark. Fear of the unknown. Of failure. The gut-deep certainty some things are totally out of your control – beyond your ability to even comprehend. And that any one of them could snuff you out without warning, in the infinite black cold between the dimensions.

Or on the surface of a mother-planet about which you know virtually nothing – except that something catastrophic happened there eight hundred years ago. Earth is a riddle. A hanging chord, which has echoed through the subconscious of our people for fifty generations or more. Since the time of the Separation.

Almost mythological. Our past.

A long forgotten, half-imagined Dream.

Every child on Deucalion, Human and Elokoi, knows the Histories – and the Thoughtsongs – and most of the time for most people that is enough. But not for Hanni or Jordan or me – or any of the twenty-four borderline obsessives, who made up the crew of the Expeditionary Ether-Shuttle *Cortez*.

Naturally, my father hadn't wanted me to go.

From the moment I suggested it, he'd tried to convince me that it was no more than a foolish adventure. That my 'romantic nature' was getting the better of me and I wasn't thinking things through.

Me, *romantic*?

It wasn't hard to see why he reacted the way he did. I was his only daughter and I knew how he felt about me, but I couldn't help myself.

– *It's only two years, I argued unconvincingly. Before you know it, I'll be back and you'll be wishing I was out of your hair again.*

He wasn't about to be charmed out of his opposition. Untried technology, an unknown destination. Lousy odds.

– *Don't you want to know what happened back there? I went on. Aren't you even a bit curious?*

He just shook his head.

– *Not if it's you taking the risks to find out.*

– *But if it was someone else's daughter – or son – it would be okay?*

An easy shot. I regretted it immediately, but too late. The best I could do was to leak a little remorse.

But he didn't respond. He stood up and walked towards the window, looking out at the two moons hanging low in the sky. He was upset, Shielding his thoughts from me – something he did only rarely.

For once, he had no answers.

I followed the line of his gaze.

Both moons were full and huge and about as close as they ever came to the planet's surface.

How many times had I looked up at them and really seen them?

Two moons. Eternal opposites, forever linked – to the planet and to each other – by the unbreakable chains of gravity.

Their cratered faces filled half the night sky, and the reflection from their surfaces lit the skyline.

the city like an eerie kind of daylight.

The 'hunter's sky', the Elokoi call it. Still. Even though they grew beyond the need for hunting centuries ago.

Pyrrha and Pandora.

The two sides of human nature. The virtuous and the reckless.

I just placed a hand gently on my father's shoulder. No point in trying to break into his thoughts. When he was ready, he would drop the Shield without my prompting.

Finally, he turned to face me and he was smiling slightly. Not from happiness, exactly, but looking back, I'm sure I caught a fleeting glow of pride fading from his mind, as the Shield dissolved.

– *You're too much like your mother, Erin. I could never win an argument with her, either. Not if it was important to her.* He put his arms around me and drew me close. *Just be careful.*

We rarely spoke about it again. By the end of the year, he'd moved Beyond to join my mother, and we were preparing to make the historic Jump.

Jump technology is as safe as sitting in your favourite chair.

That was what they said on the Networks during the build-up to the first expedition. *Our expedition*

But don't believe all the pre-Jump publicity.

The technology of the Casian Ether-Jump was brand new and untested under actual operational conditions. We stood a better-than-outside chance of never returning, despite what the tech-wizards from Casia insisted.

After all, their instructions came long distance, from the safety of the Ether-Jump development lab fifty light-years away on Casia 3. If it was really as safe as they claimed, they could have waited a couple more years, until their prototype was ready and tested, then arrived in person to demonstrate.

Instead they warped the blueprints and specs to the Research facility in Al-Baada – where our people were already aware of the finer details of Ether-Warp theory. Al-Baada ran its own prototype tests, then constructed the *Cortez*.

But we'd all known the details of the situation when we volunteered, so it was pointless to be feeling what I was feeling, so late in the day.

You know how it is, when you realise you're not alone in your head.

One minute, the fear is closing in like a shadow, cold, but insubstantial. The next, a feeling of warmth grows imperceptibly from somewhere beneath knowing, spreading out in all directions and driving back the dark.

Jordan, of course. Who else would be on my wavelength – and awake at that time of night?

– *Erin? Need to talk about it?*

– *No.*

– *Good. I'll be right over.*

I smiled and slipped my robe on. The door chimed before I could tie the belt.

'Open,' I said aloud, tightening the waist-tie and watching the door slide into the wall.

He stood there, leaning with one elbow against the doorframe and staring at me in typical Jordanian fashion – no self-consciousness at all.

And I found myself wishing I had something on under the robe.

– *Having second thoughts?*

– *Of course not! Try 'third thoughts'. 'Fifth thoughts!' It's so damned – stupid, Jord. I don't even know where it comes from.*

I turned away and studied the vid-picture of my father on the desk, missing his calming influence

my life.

Jordan placed a soft hand on my shoulder and turned my head gently back to face him. The smile was gone, replaced by the serious expression that few people, apart from me, were ever privileged to see.

– *Nothing stupid about being nervous, Erin. Stupid is not being a bit scared. Just don't let it take over. That's when it gets—*

– *Dangerous?* I never did get out of the habit of finishing his sentences for him. I'd been doing since we first learnt to talk. He smiled, shaking his head.

– *I was thinking more 'inconvenient'.*

– *Sure you were!*

I sat down on the bunk and he sat beside me.

– *How do you do it?* I continued. *No one else around here picks up on it. But you always seem to know.*

He shrugged.

– *Sympatica. My mother always said it was my particular gift.*

We sat there quietly for a few moments. That's the thing about Jordan. He knows exactly when to stay out of my head.

In the end, I was ready.

– *I keep getting these visions. We arrive, land and find the whole planet empty. A huge barren desert. No life. Nothing. And it scares me, Jord. I mean, we really don't know what happened. What caused the Separation. What if the whole of Earth is—*

The words ran out. Doubts make you vulnerable and I couldn't help thinking how few people I'd ever really trusted with emotions this personal. Three, maybe four. And Jordan was the only one still alive.

He didn't try to prompt; just held my gaze and waited, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

Finally, I went on.

– *Do you ever think that maybe we're just wasting our time? Putting ourselves in danger for no good reason. That maybe – shit, Jord, you've read the Histories. They sent probes to Earth, when the shuttles and the C-ships stopped coming. And none of them ever returned. Not even a warp-message. That was over seven hundred years ago. I just, I don't know.*

He stood up, shaking his head.

– *Nobody does. That's why we decided to go in the first place. But that doesn't mean that danger is inevitable.*

We're just observers, Erin. Explorers. The early settlers didn't know all that much about Deucalion but we're here now because they had the nerve to try. Besides, what's the worst-case scenario? The whole of Old Earth ends up being nothing but a giant wasteland. Totally lifeless. In which case, we find out what we can, slip back into stasis and come home. Two Real Time years burnt and a mystery solved.

All the old arguments. I'd used them to counter my father's concerns in the weeks before he died. And they all made perfect sense.

But then, so do the arguments for jack-jumping. Until you're standing up there on the edge of the cliff.

Placing my cheek against his stomach, I slid my arms around his waist and his strong fingers began massaging the tension from the muscles in my neck.

We both knew where it was leading, but it was part of the game we played. I didn't lower the Shield to let him inside, and he pretended that there was nothing going on, but the massage.

As usual, I was the first to break. I stood and kissed him.

~~Not deeply, a gentle touch of my lips on his, but he knew. He smiled and held my eyes with his, as he lifted the light robe from my shoulders.~~

And then the Shields were down and we Merged.

‘Lights,’ I whispered.

Jordan and I had grown up together. The same homestead, the same creche, same interests.

The same death wish.

Just kidding. But children from the Reaches do share things that city kids might never experience directly, in their safe, sanitised lives.

Then, when we were – what? Twelve, thirteen maybe – I let Jordan convince me to go exploring the limestone caves that pepper the coast near Taal-i-Nial. They were only about half an hour’s walk from the compound, but to us, sneaking out there alone was the adventure of a lifetime.

No other kid in the homestead would have dared even suggest it. But they weren’t Jordan.

Jordan was different. *Alter ego*. Soul mate. Thrill-seeker.

Part-time maniac.

He always had a way of making life seem that little bit more exciting and dangerous than the safe, predictable existence mapped out for us by our parents.

Mainly because the things he chose to try usually *were* exciting. And dangerous.

He chose a day when our parents were away at an Issues-Council Gathering in Covenant, the central settlement a thousand clicks away. Halli, Jordan’s older sister, was sharing responsibility – and a few biological imperatives – with my brother Josh.

Once they became otherwise preoccupied, it wasn’t too hard to Shield them out, and sneak away from the homestead – something we never could have managed if our parents were around.

It was a near-disaster, of course, but not straightaway.

The caves of Taal-i-Nial are famous for their beauty. Calcite columns, still crystal pools that reflect like mirrors and the wonderful shimmering, iridescent sheen of flow-stone on the walls. We wandered and climbed, holding hands and sharing the overpowering emotion of being inside the womb of something so ancient and untouched.

It was perfect, until we disturbed a brooding Yorum and found ourselves running and scrambling for our lives.

The Yorum is a solitary animal for twelve months of every year, herding only in the three months of winter, to mate and forage. Before the arrival of the humans, there were large populations of Yorum throughout the eastern and southern coastal regions, hunted occasionally by the Elokoi, but basically left alone, with few natural enemies except the harshness of the landscape itself.

Expansion of the human settlement, and the transformation of much of the original environment over the first couple of centuries after settlement, reduced their numbers disastrously and the herd dwindled in size.

Now, of course, you can go years without encountering even one of them.

But we couldn’t be that lucky.

This one was a female – which meant that she was bigger and more aggressive than the males, especially as she was defending two calves. She issued her snuffling growl, then charged, head-down. Her compact body was low and her powerful legs drove her forward more quickly than we could possibly run.

Jordan recovered from the shock first.

– *Quick!* he ordered, urgently. *Up here!*

He grabbed my arm and dragged me up the slope, out of its path. I could smell the stench of its breath, as it hurtled past and the stiff bristles on the side of its body tore the skin off my calf.

The pain erupted in my leg and I remember screaming. I stared at the blood in shock.

Jordan looked at me, then at the enraged animal.

The Yorum roared her anger, as her feet scrabbled for traction on the loose surface of the cave floor. It provided us with a few precious seconds and I could feel Jordan's emotion, as he scanned the cave for options.

He was excited, but in control. There was none of the panic that I could feel rising like acid into my throat.

– *Right*, he went on. *You're never going to outrun it with that leg. I'll have to buy some time. When you tell you, head as fast as you can for the entrance. It can't chase both of us.*

His Shield was completely down and I could see exactly what he was planning.

– *Oh, now come on, Jord. You can't—*

– *Of course I can*, he said. *Do you have a better plan? Relax. It's just mind over matter.*

I didn't have a better plan. At that moment, I don't think I could have confidently planned my next breath.

But Jordan was in control. He took a step down the slope, watching the Yorum, as it began its second charge.

– *Okay, then. On three. One. Two. And three. Go! GO!*

And then I ran, stumbling, struggling from rock to rock along a small natural wall formed by an ancient rockfall.

About ten metres from the cave entrance, I risked a look backwards and saw him. He had already dodged the creature's second attack and was ripping off his jacket. It was a bright yellow and he raised it above his head and waved it around, screaming insanely in the direction of the recovering animal.

It was strange to hear that sound coming from Jordan. In the ten years we'd lived in the same homestead, I don't think I'd heard more than a dozen speechwords from him. If I was within range, I could pick his thought-signature out of a crowd, but his voice –

It was higher-pitched than I'd imagined – and louder.

The Yorum paused, confused by the strange behaviour of this petty creature that had invaded her domain. Then she lowered her head again and her legs propelled her forward, directly at Jordan, who stood silent now, holding the jacket loosely in both hands.

He waited until the last possible second, until it seemed that he would be buried under half a tonne of thundering flesh. Then, at the final moment, he stepped back, flipping the jacket over the animal's head, so that it caught on the small tusks protruding from the sides of her open mouth and covered her tiny close-set eyes.

Blinded, she careered on, slamming sideways into the wall of rock, violently shaking her head to free herself of the clinging material.

Which afforded Jordan the time he needed to make his escape.

But, of course, being Jordan, he couldn't resist. Instead of climbing out along the top of the rockfall, he circled the animal as it struggled, and positioned himself behind the creature's huge body. Then, with another insane scream, he slapped it as hard as he could on the rump.

Still blinded, the Yorum leapt forward, letting out a scream that sounded a lot like fear. Finally, she shook herself free of the jacket and turned around, but this time Jordan was already escaping along the rock wall.

The Yorum let out one more roar then moved watchfully back to her young.

~~Jordan bowed to the creature, then turned to me. He was smiling and I could feel the adrenalin pumping through him.~~

~~– *You enjoyed that, didn't you?*~~

~~He didn't answer. He didn't need to.~~

~~I think that was the day I realised that Jordan was crazy – always pushing the envelope, whenever I sensed it closing in on him.~~

~~It was also the day I fell in love with him, and not just because he'd saved my life.~~

~~It was more – I don't know – the look in his eyes, when he'd bowed to the Yorum, and the feeling of respect I could sense beneath the adrenalin surge. Jordan might test the boundaries, but he would never step dangerously far beyond them.~~

~~We left the caves behind and I remember feeling completely safe with him. But I probably always had.~~

~~I was experiencing at that moment an open channel to the part of himself that he kept so carefully hidden.~~

~~It was the part that made him unique and, more than anything, I wanted to make it a part of me, too.~~

~~We were still only kids. The physical relationship would come later, slowly maturing in its own time, but from that afternoon, we were inextricably linked.~~

~~And we both knew it.~~

JACK-JUMPING

Expeditionary Ether-Shuttle *Cortez*
 in geo-stationary orbit above Al-Baada, Deucalion
 16/14/1008 Standard (J-Day minus seven)

JORDAN'S STORY

All the boring slave work had to be done before we strapped in and fired up the EJ-Drive.

There's nothing romantic about preparing an expedition like the one we were committed to. It's months of nit-picking – checking and re-checking every component and every article of inventory.

Like I said, *boring*.

Of course, the science wasn't our department. As long as you know the right button to press and the right screen to touch, as long as you have the voice commands down and you've run every emergency drill the simulator can throw at you, you really don't need to know the details of the physics and the technology that convert those commands into action.

Ether-Jump theory and the hardware required to initiate the Jump are so synapse-blowingly complicated that only a handful of minds on Deucalion – and about the same number on Casia 3 – can come close to understanding their intricacies. And, not surprisingly, none of those minds was included on the crew. Physics professors don't make good explorers, and explorers usually make lousy theoretical scientists.

For us, it was a case of press the button, close your eyes, hang on and pray. The rest was automatic except in the case of an emergency – and even then we'd be little more than glorified passengers. The real job we'd signed up to do started at the other end of the Jump.

I closed the inspection-cover with a snap, uncurled myself from my crouch, stood up and stretched theatrically.

– *Finished?* Erin flashed the question towards me, without raising her eyes from the screen in front of her.

I watched the contours of her back, smiling.

– *We're about as ready as we're ever going to be.*

She had her long hair tied up with a green cable-tie and the tiny diagnostic probe she'd been using was stuck carelessly behind her ear, as she caressed the screen with her fingertips, scrolling through the information on readiness-profiles and back-up systems.

I reached out and began massaging the muscles of her shoulders. The warmth of her seeped through the thin tunic and into my fingertips.

I shifted my attention to the curve of her neck, just where it met the base of her skull.

For a moment she responded, then she caught herself and shook her head.

– *Not now, Jord. This is the last one and I've really got to finish it. Please?*

I smiled again. The massaging stopped and I kissed the top of her head.

– *Later.*

I let my hands linger on her hair for a moment, then I pulled back and turned for the door.

A few minutes later, lying in the co-pilot's acceleration couch, alone on the deserted bridge, I stared out at the stars, trying to imagine the incredible distance we were about to travel.

And failing.

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