

A Beta Life

Jack Gabriel

Dad whistled when we stepped out of the airport. "Told you it was hotter down here than in Bangalore."

"Oh God," Ann dropped her bags. "Even the wind is hot."

But I didn't notice the heat straight away. I didn't notice my hair clinging to my neck, or the palm trees wilting in the sloppy air, the lazy cawing of gulls or even the nervous post-landing clench of my stomach.

Every other sense came second when I saw the space elevator.

The base was over five kilometres away still, sitting on a thin spit of land that pushed out into the blue sea. A great grey pyramid, some huge eldritch temple risen from the murk of the ocean, dominated the horizon. It didn't belong. Flying craft swarmed about it. From the pyramid's peak a thick structure pushed impossibly up into the sky, growing thinner and thinner until it disappeared from sight, like a lightbeam made of metal. It was so straight it looked bent, and didn't seem to match up with the little dot of grey up there that was the *Tombo*. Waiting for us.

I had to check my lenses to make sure it wasn't all a hologram, even though I knew AR didn't work on this island.

"That is well massive," Ann said, leaning back and staring up.

"No challenge for you," I said. "Slag."

Ann punched me on the shoulder. "Shut up troll."

"Now," said Dad, juggling his bags and searching his pockets, "let's get out of this doorway and... just a moment. Where is...?"

We helped Dad sidle out of the way.

The airport doors opened directly onto a thin road busy with whizzing little carts carrying too-pink people in overalls or military uniforms with shorts instead of long trousers.

Everyone else who came through the doors was there for the same reason. Their names had been at the top of someone's list. And their families names too. We were the chosen few. We would be the ones to populate the new world.

Like us, everyone paused in the doorway when they saw the space elevator for the first time. It became annoying to hear their reactions. I mostly watched the guys. Brothers guffawing and nudging

each other, single young scientists or engineers, families of all sizes. Everyone was the same when they saw that impossible needle of metal. Except toddlers. They didn't care. Their parents or older siblings stooped down and told them how amazing that thing in the distance was, but they just wanted a ride on the carts, complained of being too hot, ripped their hats off and threw them on the tarmac.

I was eight when they discovered the new planet. Re-discovered, really. It was one they'd already found back in the first splurge of discovery around the turn of the century. Then suddenly they were able to look at it a bit better, I guess, because all of a sudden they were talking about how to get us there.

Made me feel sorry for the people already on their way to colonise Mars. They'd left a couple of months before this new planet was analysed. I think they missed out on something a bit better.

The new planet had a name full of letters and numbers, but pretty soon people just started calling it by the last symbol of its name: Beta.

They advertised it well. *Live a better life on Beta. A Beta Life.*

Beta's atmosphere was very similar to Earth's, they said. In fact, the carbon-dioxide levels in Beta's air was just lower than that in our most overly-polluted cities, and everyone had gotten used to that kind of air anyway. It could support humans, adapted as they were to breathing poison.

In terms of the size of the galaxy, it was very close. But in terms of a human life it was very, very far away. We'd be in stasis for seventy years. Half a lifetime.

And two years ago I had never even left England.

This information – the history of our remote discovery of Beta – had been fed into our lenses during the flight. We didn't have to watch it, but I did. With over an hour of empty flight time to fill, I figured I might as well learn where I was going and why.

A small cart pulled away from the pack and screeched to a stop in front of us. A short man in a khaki uniform and wide-brimmed hat leapt out and hurried over to us. "Sidney Arthur?" he twanged.

Dad looked up over glasses slipped down to the end of his nose. "What? Yes?"

"And," the man pointed at Ann and me. "Your daughters. Righto. Hop in the truck, I'll take you to where you need to be."

He had an accent I could quite place. It sounded almost cockney.

"Er," said Dad. "Who are you?"

“Darryl,” the man said. “Welcome to the Chagos Spaceport. Get in, I’ll show you around, get you organised.”

In a haze from the heat we complied. Stashed our bags in the back of the little cart and went with the man.

I needn’t have wasted energy trying to guess his accent. He was a talker, Darryl was, and promptly told us that he was proudly from Australia and had we ever been?

“I work with some Australians,” Dad said. “But physically, no, I’ve never been.”

“Beautiful place,” Darryl said, and scanned his hand in front of us, as if showing us the vista of his homeland. “I’ll miss it,” he nodded. “Still. Rats off a sinking ship, eh? What line of work are you in, Sid? You’ve been assigned to Blue House, which means engineering of some sort?”

“What? Oh. Electrical and systems, yes,” Dad said, pushing his glasses back and looking around.

Everything was green. We had left the shadow of the airport now and were travelling along a straight road lined buildings that looked like little hills fronted with glass. They were all shops, selling all manner of unimportant things. Chocolate, alcohol, fruits and vegetables. Luxuries from Earth that we would never experience again until someone worked out how to make mockeries of them on Beta.

Darryl noticed the silence as we all stared out, and felt the need to fill it. “Almost completely reclaimed, this place,” he said. “This island, apart from that bit that connects us to The Big String, is a perfect square. If you’re going to build an island you may as well pick a shape, right Sid?”

“What?”

“Yep. The Chagos Archipelago, it once was. Back during the First Cold War the British kicked out the natives and set up a military base here. Bit of a scuffle about who owned the place after that. The British were mongrels about it, to be fair. But it’s on the Equator, which means the perfect place to build the elevator. Look at that bloody thing. A core made of diamonds, you know?”

“Well,” Dad said, and coughed awkwardly. “It’s actually-”

“Eh?” Darryl said. “Anyway. These buildings here are all self-sufficient. The whole island runs off its own power. Every blade of grass does its bit. Produces oxygen eight times more efficiently than real grass, and generates electricity. Almost bloody magic.”

“Almost,” Dad said.

“Plenty of shopping to do before kickoff tomorrow, hey ladies? Chocolates. Can’t get *them* in space.”

Ann was zombied out, tapping on her tile, so I had to answer. "Yeah. Chocolates."

"Look out, here we go." Darryl pulled the cart over and pointed at the elevator. "Good timing. We've got a shuttle about to leave."

Like a bug on a rope, a shuttle was clinging to base of the thick cable. Then, as if it didn't even matter, the shuttle puffed a cloud of something and was gone, zooming up the thread that connected us with the sky.

Applause broke out. Others had stopped their carts, stepped from storefronts, all to stare as one at those who'd never return and to wish them luck.

Seconds later, when it was so high up the cable we were struggling to track it, the sound of its launch washed over us. A whoosh and a crackle.

"How long does it take?" Ann said, showing emotion for the first time in days.

"Seven days and a bit of change," Darryl said. "Good food on board the shuttle. Top stuff."

Ann swiped her forehead. "It's too hot here," she said.

"You alright, Yaya?" Dad said, patting my leg.

"Yeah." I watched the shuttle blink out of sight. All those people, off to live a Beta life. "Yeah. I'm good."