

**BLACK  
TABLE**

**ANTTIMATTI  
PENNANEN**



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This is work of fiction and facts. References to size of our universe are based on current understanding within the science community. Names, places and events are mixed products of the author's imagination and real-life experiences. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. No aliens were harmed during the writing this novel.

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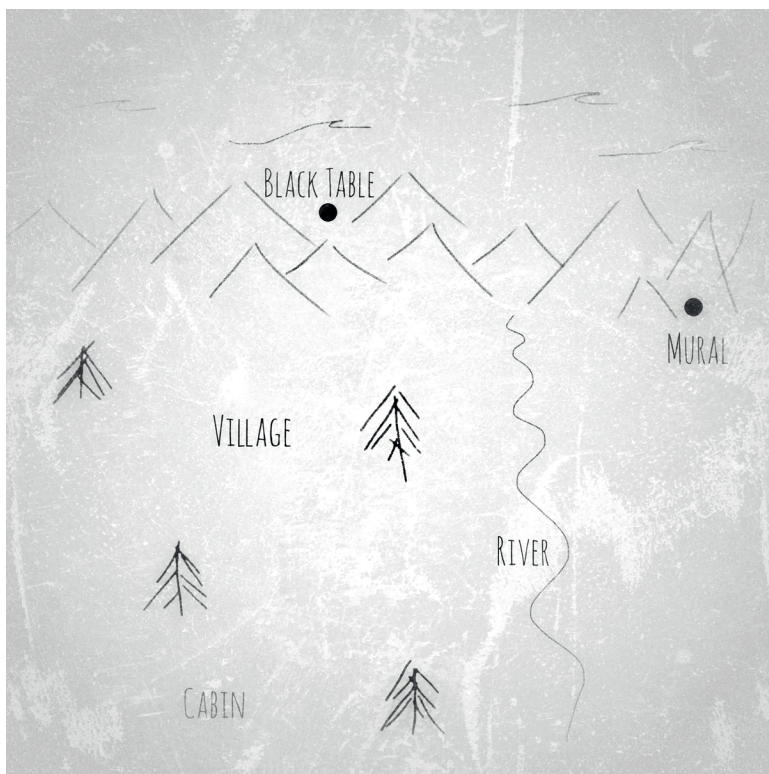
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## MAP OF NEW THATHO



### **Author's note**

The main characters in this story are from Finland. When Finns speak English, they use a mix of American and British English idioms, so gas not petrol, mobile phone not cell, jello not jelly. As the Finnish language does not have articles ('the', 'a', etc.), Finns do occasionally drop these when speaking English. To reflect this, in certain circumstances the characters do not use the definitive article. This is a style choice and not an error.

*For Krisztina and for fans of Science Fiction*  
*“With our thoughts, we are already there.”*



# CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: COMIC CON	1
CHAPTER 2: ROAD TRIP	19
CHAPTER 3: DISCOVERY	39
CHAPTER 4: CREATURE	53
CHAPTER 5: NEW THATHO	67
CHAPTER 6: ESCAPE	87
CHAPTER 7: U-TURN	107
CHAPTER 8: THE EYE	123
CHAPTER 9: AZONIA	153
CHAPTER 10: THE TRENCH	167
CHAPTER 11: BETRAYAL	179
CHAPTER 12: POLITICS	199
CHAPTER 13: OPERATION HAIL MARY	233
CHAPTER 14: UNITY	259
CHAPTER 15: “JUMP”	271







# CHAPTER 1

## COMIC CON

"'C'mon Jon, let's go!" shouted Gus, holding their heavy hotel room door open. He twisted the door handle back and forth, unable to hide his excitement. His stomach growled for the food they'd missed when arriving the day before.

This was the best hotel Gus had been able to find near Portland's event hall, and today was the second day of the three-day Rose City Comic Convention. They'd waited six months for this, not so much for the annual event itself, but because today's honoured guest speaker was someone both of them had idolised since they were kids: Dr Kevin Wells.

His novels had given birth to the best sci-fi movies and TV-series of all time and gained millions of adoring fans. He'd also authored several books on space and interstellar travel that had made him a respected member of the scientific community. His legions of devotees rarely got the chance to see him speak live, but today would be one of those occasions.

Those six months ago, Gus had stayed awake until midnight, lying on the bed in his Helsinki seaside apartment and holding a computer tablet above his head. He kept refreshing the browser every few seconds to be first in line to access ticket sales. Finally, as the clock hit twelve, a new link appeared on the screen, a purchase button. Hands shaking, Gus clicked for two tickets, full weekend, pay! As the payment went through and confirmation appeared on the screen, Gus realised he had held his breath throughout the entire process. It had felt like an hour, but it couldn't have lasted more than a minute or his body would have taken over and forced him to draw breath. Fingers shaking slightly, he messaged Jon: "I got the tickets! Portland Comic Con, here we come." Then he settled back on his pillow and smiled at the ceiling. It would be a long while before he could come down to anywhere near sleep.

And finally, the day had arrived. Jon and Gus headed for the à la carte breakfast buffet, talking about today's programme even as the more basic parts of them homed in on the smell of food. As they entered the breakfast hall, they were aware of several heads turning towards them for a better view.

At Comic Con events most fans dress up as their favourite characters. For Jon and Gus, as huge Star Trek fans, it was an easy choice of uniform: Next Generation original black designs with partly coloured tops, Jon's blue and Gus's yellow. Gus also had pointy extensions to his ears, completing the costume of a Vulcan officer. Gus liked Vulcans. Mainly because, like him, they based their life on logic, but also for their well-known greeting style.

Jon had an appearance of a modern Viking, with an athletic body, sky-blue eyes, blond short hair with a man bun on the top, and a shaved face with a few day's stubble, while

Gus had slightly longer, curly hair and a short beard, both yellowish with more than a hint of red. He claimed this came from his Irish ancestry, to which Jon always joked back that his features were pure Scandinavian heritage. They'd become best friends in school almost twenty years ago and, perhaps helped by none of the girlfriends they'd ever had becoming a permanent fixture in their lives, they were still as close as ever. More eyes began to follow them as they walked past the tables. They'd both been told they were handsome, but neither sought the attention.

Fortunately, the focus of the room now moved to Azog, a goblin character from *Lord of The Rings* who had just entered the hall. Azog had a perfect self-made mask, but his eyes looked terrified by the kind of attention he was receiving. Waving awkwardly at Jon and Gus, the goblin looked relieved to spot someone else wearing character costumes. Jon and Gus waved back in response, and the goblin relaxed visibly.

Gus gave a despairing shake of his head. "I feel bad for any alien coming to visit Earth. It will be a brutal welcome. How would we treat those from other worlds if we can barely stand each other?"

After collecting their coffees, both descended on the buffet bar and brought back plates covered in bacon, scrambled eggs, tomato and cheddar. They sat down at a free table near a family of four. The smallest family member, a girl, peeked sideways at them and Jon waved back with a smile.

"I can't wait to see Dr Wells in the flesh," Jon said. "If you could ask him one question, what would it be?" He watched, one eyebrow raised, as Gus cut his tomatoes into mush and mixed them with eggs and cheddar.

"Et voilà! Scrambled eggs, a la Gus," he declared proudly. "I have some thoughts, but I haven't decided yet. Maybe his

speech will shed light on some things I've been wondering about."

Gus had two primary hobbies, space theories and science fiction collectables. Where young single males usually decorate their homes with basic furniture, Gus's resembled more a museum of science fiction. And why not? Jon shared the same passions, having read most science fiction novels available and amassing an extensive movie collection, but kept his home more what people would term normal.

"Today, Dr Wells will talk about universe and how we comprehend it. I am super excited about that," Jon said, sipping his coffee with milk.

By the time they were finishing their breakfast, the buffet hall had filled with various characters from different movies and comics. Harry Potter was waving his wand at a coffee machine and, as if by magic, coffee appeared into a cup in front of him. His friends from Hogwarts liked it. At the warm food buffet, someone dressed up as a Superman kept having to pull up his fake arm muscles to reach deeper into the food tray. Now normal people seemed weird and out of place.

"Shall we?" Gus announced, and got up. "I don't want to get stuck at the security check line."

"Engage." Jon replied with Captain Picard's hand gesture, pointing out with index and middle finger together. And they were off.



The event shuttle buses left every fifteen minutes from outside the hotel main doors. Jon and Gus were ahead of the day's herd and only one other passenger travelled with them, the

same nervous goblin from the breakfast buffet, but now with a more confident appearance.

The event was taking place in Oregon Convention centre, which is the largest venue of its type in the Pacific Northwest, offering floor space for over a hundred stands, a stage for speeches, and designated areas for celebrity guest signings.

After a short ride, the hotel shuttle arrived at the exhibition entrance driveway and came to a stop near tall doors made of glass. Before going in, they asked their fierce-looking travel companion, Azog, to take a picture of them. Jon handed over his tablet, and the two of them stood shoulder to shoulder in front of a massive Portland Comic Con sign while Azog snapped away. Jon thanked the goblin, and they joined the small queue already forming at the bag checks and metal detectors.

Jon took a deep breath. “Scary world we live in. You need a metal detector to go to a freaking Comic Con. When we were kids, I thought cars would fly by now, and everyone would be super happy.”

Soon the hall was bustling with convention goers in an incredible array of costumes. By one stand the Hulk seemed to be chatting up Black Widow but was interrupted as a gaggle of Ewoks pushed past. There were a few people in casual clothes – jeans and tees – but they stood out like Batman at a Marvel convention. Everyone was picking up things from the stands: merchandise, books, magazines, or figures and miniature models. It was now mandatory for event organisers to reduce plastic waste by providing fabric event bags for purchases.

Two hours and a dozen Vulcan greetings later, Jon and Gus had found new Star Trek novels and limited-edition Marvel comics. At the small food court, Jon selected

two drinks from the smoothie bar, one bright green and one dark red.

“Which one? This one is called Super Monkey” – Jon held the green one in front of Gus before switching hands and offering the red one – “and this one is called Angry Flamingo.”

“I guess the Monkey?” Gus hesitated, his head tilted back and eyes wide open with suspicion that wasn’t entirely for comic effect. As Jon handed him the green smoothie, hall speakers crackled and there was the familiar whine of feedback, causing people to scowl as if they’d just bitten into the sourest lemon ever.

“Let’s go, I want us to be as close to Dr Wells as possible.”

When they got closer to the speaker area faithful fans had already filled the first two rows nearest the stage and were lifting handheld mobile devices, ready for taking photos of their idol.

“I don’t get it, why are people still busy queuing for smoothies when one of the great minds of our era is about to speak?” Gus wondered, checking the time on his mobile.

“I have no idea,” Jon replied, looking almost nervous. “It’s been a long six months of waiting.”

As Jon and Gus positioned themselves as close to podium as possible, the number of people behind them grew rapidly, filling every empty space.

“Just in time, I suppose?” Jon smiled and fist bumped with Gus.

There was another shriek of feedback. “Sorry about that! One-Two, One-Two ...” Sound filled the hall. Someone tapped the microphone, completing the soundcheck.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention?” declared a short man wearing blue jeans and a black suit jacket

with a white T-shirt under it. “I hope you are all enjoying yourselves?”

“Great, great, good, good,” he said happily when some people cheered and lifted their reusable event bags.

Short man raised his voice, “I know you have all been waiting for this, so without further delay, let me introduce you to our special guest, Dr Kevin Wells.” His left arm shot out to welcome the main speaker onto the stage.

Applause erupted from the crowd as a tall man who looked to be in his seventies strolled towards the centre of the podium. He had a shock of pure white hair like Albert Einstein, but his face resembled more that of Abraham Lincoln, elongated with a strong, thin jaw and a long nose. He wore sandals, beige cargo shorts, and an old T-shirt with a Van Halen logo on it. Over his T-shirt he wore a slightly too small blue suit jacket, which drew a few grins and whispered comments from the crowd. Dr Wells stepped up to the podium and looked around the audience with a gentle smile on his face.

“Hi everyone! I am so happy to see you all in such a wonderful mood.” He nodded, and it seemed as though he wanted to meet every pair of eyes in the audience. Then he inspected himself. “Did you expect me in a lab coat, or perhaps a suit and tie?” He smiled again softly. “I have never been comfortable in expected forms. And, honestly, my luggage got lost during the flight and I expected to have shelter behind this podium. The jacket I borrowed here from one of the security guards.”

This was met with smiles and random cheers from the audience.

“So, I am here to talk about time and life in the cosmos, and how these two ideas intrigue and control us. Especially

this crowd. I bet every one of you would like to know whether there is more life out there somewhere. And if so, are they like us, are they friendly, are they able to travel through space, and do they know about us?”

As people nodded in agreement, the wall-sized screen behind him lit up showing a picture of the cosmos timeline squeezed into one calendar year, starting with January 1st, when the cosmos was allegedly born, and reaching to 9:25pm on December 31st, the time when humans appeared on Earth.

“They call this a Cosmic Calendar. Not my work, to be clear. When looking at this calendar one cannot but realise that, even with the high probability of other intelligent life existing out there, those beings finding us have the same chance as locating a certain grain from all the sand in the Sahara. Also, this specific sand grain would be visible for only two seconds ...”

A contemplative silence ran through the audience.

“The probability someone finds it is astronomically small.”

Some nodded their heads, and some smiled in confusion, as if the speech had been in Greek.

“So you see, you would not only need to be in the correct place but also there at the correct time. And as if that weren’t hard enough, do not forget that we are not in the same place all the time. As we speak, we are hurtling through space at a speed of 31 km per second. Not only do we go around our sun once each year, we also spiral through space with the rest of the Milky Way galaxy. That little trip takes from 225 to 250 million years, and it keeps our position in constant movement.”

The presentation continued for an hour of mind-blowing details that made clear just how small we on the Earth are.



“And for the first fourteen billion years we were not even around,” explained Dr Wells. “Who knows how many times civilisations like ours have been born, grown old and then died, erased one after another into a vast timeline. Our last 100 years of technical advancement feels like less than the blink of an eye compared to the time before us.” He paused and let his gaze sweep through the audience. “There is also something I would like to ask all of you. If we could travel through space to other galaxies, how would you do it?”

He pointed to someone near the stage. “Yes, you. A pilot from *Battlestar Galactica*.”

Laughs all around.

“I would use hibernation to cross the space,” Pilot said.

“Not bad, sleep through the long trip,” Dr Wells responded. “This is one way to do it, if we do not come up with a faster way to travel.” He nodded to the audience and then continued. “But have you ever thought about waiting, instead of setting off on your journey the minute it becomes possible? Until a point when technological advances mean higher speeds become available? Let’s say you start your trip with the fastest speed available today, sleeping all the way to the finish line. No problem, you get there when you get there. But if you waited just another 200 years, we might come up with technology that takes us there much, much faster, easily arriving ahead of the sleepers who started out 200 years ago.”

Again he waited as people looked at each other, their faces showing their changing thoughts. “Or is that exactly what makes us, us? We just cannot wait if we have the means. Even imperfect ones. The same way brave people who once crossed the oceans using the simplest of methods. We must know what’s out there. Is it in our nature?” Dr Wells let his

words sink in with his audience, and the whole hall was now silent.

“Let that brew in our minds for now. Meanwhile, what do you think about gravity and how to overcome it?” He gazed fondly at his audience his eyes filled with curiosity.

He led the discussion for another hour, from gravity to black holes and on to warp drive.

“If anyone could come up with a means of faster space travel it would be you, with your imagination and your drive for exploration. I hope you all had a great time, and I hope my musings have given you something to think about. I wish you all the best. Live long and prosper.” He finished the sentence with the Vulcan hand gesture for farewell, and the audience exploded into full applause.

As he walked offstage, he searched the audience once more with his eyes, then muttered something to himself.

“Did you see that?” Gus poked Jon with his elbow. “Something is off.”

Short man appeared back on the stage and shook hands with Dr Wells as he exited.

“Dr Wells everyone,” he declared, and the crowd applauded again. “And don’t forget you can meet Dr Wells in person by the exit where we have a stand set up for his latest book signing.”

“I will buy his latest book and have it signed by the man himself. How about you?” Gus asked.

“For sure.” Jon replied in agreement by lifting his now empty smoothie mug.

At the exit, a stand for book signing had erected near the two massive glass doors. Behind the stand were tall posters with illustrations of space. In front of it, behind a table, sat Dr Wells. To either side of him stood piles of his books, and

behind him a young assistant kept loading more to replace the ones Dr Wells handed over after signing them.

Even though Jon and Gus had skipped several interesting stands on their way to exit, several people had managed to get there ahead of them.

“What? How?” Gus cried out after seeing the line in front of them.

“Don’t worry,” Jon calmed his friend. “We have plenty of time.”

Twenty long minutes later they were next in line. The girl in front of them exchanged a few words with the doctor and giggled when she received her copy of the book.

“Thank you, Doctor. I’m a big fan of yours,” she spoke adoringly and leant in closer, thanking him again and again. Her movements were clumsy and erratic causing the line to react, moving back and forward like an old steam train taking off from the station. As it did Jon and Gus found themselves bumping into Dr Wells’s table, and his gaze swung round to the source of the disturbance.

“I do apologise, Dr Wells. We really loved your presentation. Fantastic work! I’m Gus and this is my friend Jon,” Gus said nervously in English, and out of habit started to lift his hand into the Vulcan greeting even though Jon was pulling on his sleeve to stop him.

Dr Wells let the book he’d been about to sign drop. He looked like he had seen the magic trick of a lifetime, amazement mixed with confusion and curiosity. Then he smiled, gently, just as he had at the podium, and his eyes became glassy with tears.

Jon hadn’t noticed it earlier, but Dr Wells had a long, thin scar reaching from between his hairline and left eye, down to his chin, like an old battle wound. He opened his mouth

to say something, but then his smile dropped and now his eyes were taut with fear. He grasped his left shoulder with his right hand and grunted in pain.

“Not now,” he rasped in agony.

“Oh, shit, I think he’s having a heart attack,” Jon said to the assistant who gaped at him for a second then started dialling 911.

Dr Wells fell off his chair. On the way down, he pulled a pile of books with him. Jon pulled the table out of the way and told people to stay back and leave some space. On the floor Dr Wells was lying on his side, doubled over with pain. Even so, he reached for one of the fallen books and started writing in it.

“Holy crap. Is he *really* signing that book ...?” Gus stared wide eyed at Jon, who gave the same reaction in response. Jon knelt next to Dr Wells, his hands cradling the man’s head to stop it from hitting the floor. The pen fell from the doctor’s hand and suddenly the book was being pushed into Jon’s hands.

“Here Jon, find the ...” Then he seemed to be hit by a wave of pain so strong that he could not get the final words out. He closed his eyes and stopped breathing.

“Move!” Two paramedics burst in from the tall glass doors, one of them shouting orders. They always had a unit close by when bigger events were happening. Telling everyone to make space, Jon and Gus joined the others in a large half circle of people around the exit doors. The hall had become silent, apart from paramedics who performed their routine on Dr Wells.

“He is in a cardiac arrest,” declared one kneeling next to unconscious Dr Wells, holding a stethoscope on his chest while the second paramedic began pulling out electric pads

from a portable defibrillator. The one with the stethoscope raised his body up and used his whole upper body weight to press Dr Wells's chest with both hands. After thirty rapid presses on his chest, he used a manual pump placed on Dr Wells's face to squeeze air into his mouth. The second paramedic cut open Dr Wells's T-shirt with medical scissors and placed two pads from a portable defibrillator on his body.

"Clear!" the paramedic operating the defibrillator shouted.

Both lifted their hands into air. Dr Wells's back arched upwards and dropped back against the floor. Reading the defibrillator screen, he called out once more, "Again! Clear!"

Both lifted their hands, Dr Wells's body arched again, nothing. Jon and Gus looked at each other in disbelief. The entire scene seemed unreal. The person they had been idolising their entire life was slipping away right in front of them, and there was nothing they could do. Jon could feel how the urge to help slowly changed to helplessness. Gus instead kept thinking it was all part of some nightmare he could wake up from any time now. He did not. The paramedic operating the defibrillator opened his small red medical bag with a white cross embedded on the top and pulled out a long injection needle and a tiny bottle.

"Adrenaline?" he asked his colleague, who confirmed it with a firm nod. He placed the needle firmly against the disinfected area of Dr Wells's skin until the needle sunk in and watched the liquid disappear into Dr Wells's arm. When done, he quickly pulled out the needle and wiped the arm again with a disinfecting pad.

"Again!" he shouted.

"Clear!" the other paramedic shouted, and all hands were off the body. Dr Wells's back arched again. They performed

the shock three more times. Jon and Gus stood motionless, watching their hero lying inert on the cold event hall floor. They waited for a miracle to come, but it never came.

“He’s gone,” said the one with the needle still in his hand.

The show was over. When the paramedics opened a white sheet to cover their lost patient, people continued whispering to each other and lowered their upheld mobile phones.

“I think we can call it a day,” Jon said in shock.

Gus agreed and both walked out through the exit next to them, catching the shuttle already waiting for returning passengers. During their short ride to the hotel, they agreed to fly back home. After all, their hero was dead. There was no reason for them to return and live through the horrific memories next day.



Once back at the hotel they passed reception and took an elevator to third floor. Their room was the second on the left. Gus slid a white credit card sized key into the key slot and pulled it out. A red light appeared on top of the lock. Gus took a deep breath and repeated the key routine, only slower this time. This time a green light went on, and the lock made a mechanical sliding sound. Gus pressed down the handle and opened the door.

“If we leave in half an hour, we could still catch a taxi and get an earlier flight back to Europe,” Gus said and threw his cabin-sized luggage from the floor onto his bed. “Did he really sign the book?” he said in disbelief. “Or did he write, *Nice meeting you, gotta go and get a heart attack?*” he finished with sarcasm in his voice from the anger and sadness he felt throughout his body.

Jon poured the contents of his fabric event bag out onto his bed and pushed aside brochures and collectables to reveal his signed treasure in a form of a black book with planets and galaxies printed on the front cover, and Dr Wells's picture with a short book description in the back.

"Smart, it looks like space, being black and all. Look." Jon turned the book in his hand towards Gus.

"And the signature?" Gus asked.

The book was a hardback and Jon opened it, on the first page was a handwritten line.

"Just gibberish," Jon said, confused and feeling sorry for Dr Wells. "I guess he had no idea what he was doing?" He closed the book and handed it to Gus, who opened it to the same first page and examined the text.

"Well, it's not his signature, that's for sure," Gus said frowning and read out loud what Dr Wells had written down, "*minus lampshade dreamer.*" He gave Jon a puzzled look and then returned his gaze to words to the book. "*Minus lampshade dreamer. Minus lampshade dreamer,*" he repeated the words at a different pace, as if they would then make more sense. "I suppose he was delirious and thought he is still writing his name?"

"There's one thing though ..." Jon held out his hand towards Gus, who handed the book back to him. "When he pushed the book into my hands, he said; 'Jon, find the ...'"

"Find what? And how did he know your name?" Gus wondered with a dramatic pause. "Although I did introduce us when we met him. But even so, lucky guess." They stared at each other, unable to accept the words being just gibberish.

Gus sat on his bed dug into his satchel and pulled out a tablet which he activated with his thumbprint. As the display switched on, he opened a browser.

“Maybe it’s a password of some kind? He typed *Dr Wells* in his search engine with the word *minus* and hit the search button.

Several links to mathematical signs appeared on his screen.

“Well that’s not it,” said Gus disappointed, and then removed *Dr Wells* and added words *lampshade* and *dreamer* in the search bar, just like Dr Wells had written them during his last seconds.

After pressing the search button, his browser window filled with links to studies what dreaming of lampshades could mean. Gus could feel frustration grow inside him, raising tension in his body and making him sweat. He searched again, this time with words *Dr Wells* and *dreams*, only to get another list of meaningless links. He tossed his tablet back on the bed close to his pillow and stood up.

“I’m taking a shower,” he said, kicking off his shoes and pulling off his shirt on his way to bathroom.

Jon picked up his own tablet and opened a browser. He used the words Dr Wells wrote down and crosschecked them with various keywords like: *studies, space, Portland, home, missing, planet, person*, but all searches came up empty, or with links that made no sense whatsoever. Even so, Jon clicked the links and checked if they would lead somewhere. They did not. He leaned back and lay his back against the bed with his legs bent over the edge and his feet touching the floor. He pulled the pillow closer and placed it under his head. He took a deep breath and glanced at his tablet display once more before switching it off and placing it on his stomach.

Gus came out from the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist. He had another, smaller towel, which he used to run over his reddish hair.



“Any luck?” he asked, seeing Jon staring at the ceiling with his tablet in his belly.

“Find the ...” Jon kept repeating quietly, his eyes searching the air in front of him. He sat up, catching his tablet with his left hand and holding up his right-hand index finger in front of his face. Gus knew from their past this meant Jon was having an idea, or at least thinking he had an idea.

“Just say it,” Gus blurted out as Jon waved his index finger about.

“Show it to me again.” Jon stretched his right arm. “Yes, of course,” he said once the book was open on his lap. “Search this with your tablet ...” He waited for Gus to find it. “Type; *minus.lampshade.dreamer*.”

“Been there, done that.” Gus raised his eyebrows as he felt slightly annoyed by Jon’s request.

“I know, but this time write them all together, separated with dots.”

A massive lightbulb lit up in Gus’s processing mind.

“How come I didn’t see that?” he cried out, blaming himself for not realising it first.

He typed the words with dots on his search engine. Nothing. Another lamp lit up in Gus’s head. “It won’t work on search engine,” he said. Now Jon looked confused. “I remember! It’s a tool or an application called *what3words*.”

“Exactly! That’s the one!” Jon remembered he had read an article about it on the plane prior to their arrival. The article was about a global mapping tool which would pinpoint an exact location with just three words. He found the article interesting as it turned out that rescue personnel and law enforcement are already using it to find lost people.

Gus opened a home page made for the application and typed the three mysterious words into the search window.

Before hitting 'search' he looked at Jon, who nodded approval for proceeding. Gus pressed the search button. A map grid appeared and indicated instantly the location with a black dot surrounded by a white circle. Gus felt his pulse rate going up and his breathing accelerating when he zoomed out from the spot, revealing the location from a higher point of view. Several location names appeared on the screen: Cameron Lake, Cathedral Grove, and MacMillan Provincial Park. Gus kept zooming out.

"MacMillan Provincial Park, on Vancouver Island, in Canada!" Gus shouted excitedly, then paused, not realising why he was so excited. "MacMillan Provincial Park on Vancouver Island, in Canada?" his voice inflecting upwards.

"Canada? Why there? What does he want us to find?" Jon wondered, standing now next to Gus and leaning in to see the map. "Maybe coordinates to his pacemaker?" he said sarcastically. "Too early?" He stopped smiling, realising Gus might still be in shock from today's tragedy. "Sorry," Jon apologised and placed his arm over his friend's still wet shoulders. "Whatever it is, I think it's our duty to find it out." He looked straight at Gus's eyes with determination. "These were his last words after all, kinda. Or technically also my name was in his last word, but you know what I mean?"

"I do," Gus finally responded. "And seems like it's about nine hours' drive with the ferry crossing." He paused. "What if we do not check out today, but stay tonight here as planned, and leave early tomorrow morning, driving towards Vancouver, Canada?"

"I'm all in. I will go to reception and ask if we can get a car rental directly from hotel." Joh picked the hotel key from Gus's night table, gave a fist bump to Gus and hurried out.



## CHAPTER 2

### ROAD TRIP

**E**arly next morning, Jon and Gus were the very first ones at breakfast. They walked in as soon as the door to buffet area opened. They collected their white porcelain plates and filled them with various breakfast foods. After taking their plates to the same table they sat at the day before, they picked up several juices and coffee.

As they dug into their breakfast, Gus pulled out a tablet from his black fabric satchel. It was one of those tablets, where the cover had a full keyboard while the display still worked as a touchscreen. While eating and sipping drinks, he typed words into his keyboard and then moved the tablet screen with his fingers.

“Here.” Gus turned it towards Jon. “I have my own application for navigation. This is one of our company’s products. Not only is it free for users, but it also knows the traffic jams, speed traps, and the best of all, scenic routes. But what makes it different from other navigators, this one has an augmented reality.”

“Augmented what?” Jon asked before taking a bite of his perfect breakfast creation.

“When you hold your tablet or phone in front of you, like this,” Gus held his tablet display towards Jon, “the app will show the way on the screen as you see it in front of you, through your camera,” Gus explained, full of excitement.

Jon took the tablet from Gus and moved it in front of himself. The display had the vast breakfast room in view, with a three-dimensional arrow pointing the way where to go.

“Now,” Gus said, “if we take this route that the app recommends, we can make the drive almost an hour faster.”

Jon stared at the screen and gave his approval by nodding as he had mouthful of croissant filled with fresh tomatoes and overcooked ham.

“This is so good,” he mumbled, croissant pieces dropping down to his plate.



Gus was always the tech guy. Wherever he went, he always took with him not only his phone, but at least two tablets and two backup power banks, one equipped with small solar panels. One of the zippered compartments in his satchel was filled with cables. Whatever cable ending was needed, he had them all.

While Gus was the tech guy, Jon was the survival one. He also had a fabric satchel, but in military dark green, including an outside pocket with a military issued metallic water bottle peeking out from it. He did not leave the house without his satchel, always equipped with water, first aid kit, some protein bars, compact flashlight, his tablet, fire starter flint, and a red Swiss Army knife, just like the one MacGyver had. He had

begged his parents for it on their road trip across Europe when he was ten years old. They were visiting a small village called Zermatt in the south of Switzerland. This was also the first time he had tried cheese fondue and Swiss chocolate. Only twenty years later he learned that the 4500-metre-high mountain to the side of Zermatt, called the Matterhorn, is the mountain on his favourite chocolate bar, Toblerone. When life gives you; *aha* moments, this had become his favourite by far.



When they finished with their breakfast, they headed for reception. Behind the counter, a hotel employee, named Philip according to his name tag, handled their check out.

“And how was your stay?” he asked while typing on the computer. “Anything from the minibar?” Still typing. “And would it be cash or credit?” he said, all in a rehearsed dialogue.

“Credit, and no, nothing from minibar,” Gus said, still without getting any eye contact from Philip.

“That would be \$275 with city tax,” Philip declared.

“Great. Where do I ...?” Gus wondered and flipped his credit card.

“Here.” Philip stretched out a credit card reader with cables attached to his terminal. Gus finished the payment and received the receipt. “Here you go sir, have a beautiful day. Next!” Philip called in a firm and loud voice.

Gus turned around.

“There’s no-one else here,” he said and put away his receipt, still not getting eye contact from Philip. “Freaking robot,” Gus said quietly.

“What’s that, sir?” Philip asked, looking finally at Gus.

“I said, I forgot my yogurt ...” Gus made up a lie and turned around with a flat grin.

Both Gus and Jon now had their satchels and cabin-sized hard black flight bags with them. One after the other, they went out through a rotating exit door and turned left towards the rental car parking area as indicated by a small sign attached to the exterior wall.

“Nice!” Gus shouted happily when he saw a massive new white SUV that seemed to be the only car in front of them. “You *really* did it this time,” he said and gave a fist bump for Jon.

“I’m glad you like it,” Jon said, and fist bumped with Gus, “because our car is the one behind it.” Jon stretched his arm with the car keys and remotely opened the doors to a little red hatchback Toyota. The car honked twice when the doors unlocked. The Toyota had hidden easily in the shadow of the massive white SUV next to it.

“Like I said,” Gus added and laughed, “you really did it this time.”

Even though Gus would have easily afforded the massive new SUV, he had no problem enjoying the simple and small things in life, which this time was a trip with his friend in a tiny vehicle.

They put their cabin bags into the Toyota’s tiny back trunk and their satchels on the backseat.

“I can take the first drive,” Jon said, and they hopped in.

Jon started the car with a traditional ignition system by turning the key. He reversed and then pulled them out from the hotel parking area.

“Road trip!” both shouted in unison and fist bumped again.



The weather turned out to be perfect for a road trip, not too hot, random clouds, and the sun shone most of the time on their right side and later behind them. After an hour or so, they switched drivers on a stop with a scenic view. The trip went fast listening to music on the radio. The driver always picked the channel, and Gus had found one that played rock ballads. With the more popular songs, they both knew the lyrics and tried to sing along. Between songs, they were trying to guess what Dr Wells's mysterious location could be.

"Best beaver and raccoon spotting in Vancouver Island?" Jon guessed, googling from his phone what Vancouver is known for. "A personal bear encounter?"

"There are bears?" Gus said horrified, imagining what they would do if they ran into a bear. "What do you do, if you encounter a bear?" he finally asked. "They're dangerous, aren't they?"

"If we run into a bear," Jon said, knowing Gus was not too familiar with animals and nature in general, "you have to stand absolutely still, while I go and run for help." Jon let it sink in before his friend realised Jon was messing with him.

"Very funny," said Gus. "You stay, and I run for help."

They both laughed.

"What else is in Vancouver? What does he want us to find?" asked Gus.

Jon looked at his phone again.

"There are massive trees, and a strong indigenous heritage called First Nation." Jon paused. "I know, he wants us to find a house built on old burial site which is haunted with angry souls and is a portal to beyond this realm." Gus moved his

hands and made a spooky howl while referring to the movie *Poltergeist*.

“Noooo, I think it’s a secret laboratory,” Gus said in return. “Or his man cave with all kinds of alien conspiracy theories on the wall.”

Both laughed.

“Oh, you remember this song?” Gus shouted excitedly when Aerosmith’s ‘Don’t Want to Miss a Thing’ came on the radio.

“Sure, from the movie *Armageddon*,” Jon said and turned up the volume.

“Oh yes, that’s right, *Armageddon*.” Gus clearly remembered something else, which was right away caught by Jon.

“Aaa, Jenni?” he asked and poked Gus with his elbow.

“What? Don’t be absurd.” Gus waved his hand like he didn’t care.

“Absurd? You don’t use words like absurd,” Jon pressed the subject and got more excited. “I remember now. It was one of the songs at the sport camp a long time ago.”

“I remember.” Gus looked smiling at his friend. “It was a very special time. Anyway, I don’t know where I would be today if we hadn’t had met back then.”



Gus was in the fourth grade and outside on recess with all other students. He had been an outcast since he had moved from Ireland to live with his uncle and aunt in Finland. When he was five years old, a police officer and a social worker had picked him up from day care. He was told his parents had been in a car accident. A drunk driver had ploughed into them at full speed, running a STOP sign. Both of his parent



had died instantly. Gus's only option was to move to Finland and live with his father's brother, who had married a Finnish woman. In time, he had learned Finnish, but was unable to disguise his Irish accent. For him, every recess included a routine of trying to fit in, while being invisible. Even among his classmates, he was constantly watching for bullies. Boys are boys, they say. You only need to wait till you get older and it gets easier, they said. They, being the teachers and parents of bullies. Nevertheless, for kids in school, what was fun for some, was hell for someone else, someone else like Gus.

During class, everything seemed fine. Bullying was not visual, only whispers and flying pieces of paper, but it affected Gus so much he didn't want to raise his hand or answer any teacher's questions. That would attract the bullies' attention, and there were many questions he knew the answers for. It was a silent but violent oppression.

Once the recess bell rang, he became completely aware of his bullies. He always tried to find an exit through dark corners where his tormentors didn't pay attention. He used the same routine when going back to class, trying to blend into crowds, sneak ahead, pretend as if being in teacher's shadow would give some kind of invisible shielding. The shielding was faint and narrow, and worked only when the teacher looked directly at you. Bullies knew this very well.

It wasn't the constant pushing in aisles and stairs, nor the random nicknames being shouted, it was the group consciousness that got to him. The common echo when other kids joined the chanting and humiliation. That made Gus feel like he didn't have any friends. It was him against the whole world. And what did he do to deserve it? He was guilty of having reddish hair, which was not common in Finland. He was also guilty of being a new student, transferred from

another country, Ireland. He spoke with a different accent, and that seemed to be enough for the bullies. The most active ones had come up with different nicknames to call him. They called him *a carrot*, *Irish loser*, and what he hated the most; *red riding orphan*. Also, the way he spoke gave the bullies more fuel to come at him. Once they had heard Gus compliment someone during the class by saying ‘nice’. But he had said with Irish accent; *noice*. Since then, people passing him in the hallways just chanted; *noice, noice, noice ...* over and over again. Gus could have fought back, but he didn’t have a violent bone in his body, and because he didn’t want to become like them, he got stuck with his situation.

Without friends, he spent his time with puzzle solving games and learning programming algorithms with a Commodore-64 and early PCs. The programs he made weren’t anything fancy, but it gave him early access and insight on how software worked. As anyone who has done programming knows, you either have it or you don’t, similar to a musical talent. Having a piano standing in the house does not mean you are able to play it. Either you need lessons, or you have so great a passion for it, you’ll learn it all on your own. Gus had the latter for computers and programming. He and algorithms spoke the same language.

But right now, he stood in the hallway, surrounded by five thugs holding his maths book.

“You want it orphan? Ha? Do you?” said one of the thugs with a brown messy undercut hairstyle, holding Gus’s maths book above his head.

Others around him kept chanting, *noice, noice, noice*. Gus didn’t go for it, knowing from experience the book would be tossed to the next guy and then the next, keeping him just an inch away from its reach.

“C’mon, you may as well give it back,” Gus said, “it’s not like you understand any of it.”

This made other thugs go, “Uuuuuuu ...” while holding their fists in front of their mouths.

The one with the book became red with anger.

“I’m gonna—” he said but was interrupted by another voice coming from behind him.

“You’re gonna *what?* Tommi?”

The sound made Tommi turn around to see who interrupted his malicious routine, and once he did, he tossed the book on the floor in front of Gus. The red anger had vanished from his face and been replaced with ghostly white.

“Do that again, and I’ll break your nose and fingers, and while we are at it, I’ll break your legs just as a bonus ...” the voice continued.

Gus was pushed on to the ground along and, with revengeful looks, Tommi and his compliant minions fled. Jon rushed to Gus’s aid, helping him up. Gus couldn’t help but notice that Jon stood a full head taller than himself.

“My name is Johannes Peterson. But everyone calls me Jon.” A kid with a short blond hair and a broad smile said, offering his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” Gus shook Jon’s hand. “My name is Brian. Brian O’Brien.”

“Ouch! Perhaps your parents didn’t like you very much either?” Jon asked, leaning backwards, trying to avoid catching the name like a flu.

“I know,” Gus answered. “That’s why I like to be called Gus, from my middle name, Fergus.”

“Fergus, nice. Gus it is then.”

Both laughed while exchanging their very first fist bump.

They were both in the same year level but different classes. Gus recognised Jon as one of the popular kids in school. He was athletic, and Gus never saw him tormenting other kids. Jon was known to be in few fights, which he never started, but always ended. A year back, some fifth-graders tried to push him around when he was just in the third grade. To the bullies' surprise, Jon jumped on them and gave a bloody nose to the two main bullies. The others ran away after realising they had taken too big a bite to swallow. Since then he'd been left alone, and by now, the legend says he fought against ten kids and won. Jon never corrected this error.

After the sudden rescue, Gus and Jon stayed friends. Jon got Gus to try some sports, and Gus got Jon interested in computer games and computers in general. In common sport lessons, Jon made sure Gus was picked first into soccer and basketball teams, not last, as Jon was always the one choosing the teams. And once they were in the same class together from grade five, Gus covered Jon in maths by blurting out the answer if Jon hesitated on his turn on the blackboard. The teachers never made the connection. The chanting and bullying continued all the way to high school. But with Jon, Gus pushed it through.

At the beginning of the summer when they were fifteen years old, Jon planned on going to a sport camp, but not without his best friend. One evening in Gus's room, as they lay prone upon the carpeted floor supporting their heads with their arms watching *Total Recall*, Jon popped his question.

"Are you crazy?" was Gus's reaction. "You know I suck at sports."

"But they are not like real sports." Jon defended his plan. "More like games and stuff, and I know Jenni is going ..." Jon

poked Gus in the ribs a few times. “I saw the signup list at coach Aalto’s office.”

“Really? Jenni is going?” Gus looked surprised. “I mean ... why would I care?”

“Oh c’mon ...” Jon pushed the topic. “I know you have had a crush on her since you came to this school.”

“I doubt she’s even aware I exist,” Gus said, looking disappointed.

“Then this camp will help to change that injustice,” Jon encouraged. “So, shall I sign you up?”

“Fine” – Gus gave Jon a serious look – “but she better be there.”

“She will be. And now shut up, Arnold is about to tell himself to go to Mars ...”

“Get your ass to Mars!” they both shouted at the scene on the small TV screen on the floor in front of them.

Camp started in two weeks, and Jenni was also there. But no matter how much Gus wanted to talk to Jenni, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. With the games requiring light physical, as well as strategic and thinking tasks, Jon and Gus were an unbeatable team. They won every competition, every day. Jenni also noticed this and finally came over to Jon and Gus with her friends. There was a lot of blushing by Jon and Gus, and a lot of giggling by the girls. In the closing days of the camp, they all spent more time together, but Gus could not get over his fear to get to know her better. Gus felt like the last days just slipped through his fingers.

On the final evening, the camp had a party with dancing and games. For the very last song, Gus collected all his courage and asked Jenni for a slow dance. It was the very same song by Aerosmith. They had their moment, but with fear

of being rejected, Gus never asked her out. Maybe because he didn't know what they would do on a date.

For much of their free time when growing up, Jon and Gus went to the movies and spent their summer holidays at Jon's parent's cabin at the lake reading comics together. Only after they both turned eighteen, and when girls became interested in Jon, his time became more divided. And that was okay, they stayed friends living only a few blocks from each other in Helsinki.

Gus graduated from Helsinki University of Technology top of his class and was now running one of the most innovative start-up companies in Scandinavia. He had his own office space rented near the university and currently had over fifty employees. He was referred to as the brains of the company, but without ambition for leadership, he hired someone else to do it for him. The company specialised in software development, hired by companies to rewrite their core software to become more efficient and user-friendly.

For Jon, school was never his thing. His grades were not bad, and good enough to get him into the university he was interested in, majoring in biology, with extra language courses on the side. After a few years, Jon decided to drop out and escape from all the pressure of what to do in the future. To his own and Gus's surprise, Jon enlisted in the army and was instantly recognised to be fit for more demanding training. Right after enlisting, he was approached by Army Special Forces for commando training. Altogether, Jon spent three years in the army. Gus didn't hear from Jon until he had returned to civilian life.

After his return, Gus noticed how it seemed like Jon had lost his smile. They didn't talk about it much, but now and then Jon hinted about war-game stories like how he once

lived in the forest for six months and engaging in secret operations like you only see in movies. One time, according to Jon, he and his team were travelling by foot at night through hostile territory when enemy learnt of a possible incursion and started searching for them. All Jon could tell Gus was that the enemy used heat sensor technology to chase them down. The enemy surrounded Jon and his team, who had dug themselves under the snow to avoid detection. Massive enemy armoured vehicles rolled up just two metres from their heads, before coming to a full stop. Jon and his team could hear the vehicle crews talking, but after a few minutes they drove away, believing Jon's team was somewhere else. Still, to this day Gus got chills every time he thought about it.

Without any diploma, Jon settled on working as a barista in a coffee shop he opened between the local university and Gus's office, earning enough money to go to the gym and hang out with Gus almost every day. He enjoyed being around people, and most of all, he loved coffee.

Then, out of the blue, Gus and Jenni met again after all those years at Jon's cafe, which Gus still thinks was orchestrated by Jon. He vaguely remembers Jon smirking behind the espresso machine. Something was off, but the meeting with Jenni was worth it. They were together for a year. Jenni even moved in with Gus, but eventually they realised they wanted different things from life – a clash of Gus's boyish sci-fi decorations, and Jenni's dreams of having kids. They parted as friends. Jenni now had two kids and Gus worked with his company, and his collectable toys.



On the road after crossing the border into Canada, hunger took over and they decided to take a little detour to get some food. Based on reviews, the best local Mexican restaurant was located just on the edge of downtown Vancouver, before their ferry ride to Vancouver Island.

“Burrito a day, keeps the doctor away,” Gus said.

*Another Gus’s weird sayings*, Jon thought.

“I’m so hungry I will go full zombie and start chewing your arm off if I don’t get some food, and fast,” Gus cried.

“Ten more minutes and we are there. Keep your zombie fixations to yourself till then ...” Jon pulled away his hand and laughed. “We can just pick up food and eat it during the ferry crossing.”



After a refreshing ocean windy ferry ride from mainland to Vancouver Island, they were back in their car with their bellies so full they didn’t need words to keep going. As they drove the surrounding trees were massive.

“Just follow the map,” Gus said, and waved to his tablet displaying the remaining trip ahead of them, showing an arrival time in twenty minutes.

“Have you seen anything like that?” Jon asked, looking at the trees.

“Only in pictures,” Gus said. “Our destination is not near any road, so we need to do a little hike.”

The closer they got, the bigger the trees grew. They travelled in the midst of giant western red cedar and Douglas fir trees. Gus googled the trees while Jon was driving.

“Douglas-fir trees are also known as Oregon pine and Colombian pine,” he read out loud. “And what makes them



so special, is that they grow up to 100 metres tall, and their trunk at ground level can become so thick, you could make a tunnel through it for cars. Both tree types can be found from California to British Columbia, Canada.”

The surrounding nature was awe-inspiring as they arrived at the parking area reserved for hikers.

“This seems to be the closest parking area to our destination,” Gus read from his tablet while Jon looked for an empty place amongst the other cars. Jon accelerated and pulled on the handbrake, causing their car to slide directly into a parking space.

“Like a glove!” he shouted with his best Jim Carrey Pet Detective impersonation, and they fist bumped.

They exited the car and picked up their satchels and jackets from the back seat. Jon locked the car and threw his satchel over his head, landing it perfectly at his waist with the strap across his back and chest over his left shoulder. On his head, he put on a dark green baseball cap from his work, with a brown coffee bean embroidered on front above the visor.

Gus wrapped his grey hoodie around his waist and hung his black fabric satchel on his right shoulder. In his left hand, he held his tablet with a map to their destination.

“Looks like we have a one-hour hike ahead of us,” Gus said, pointing to a barely discernible path leading away from the official trail routes. “We keep Cameron Lake on our right and then cross through the forest. We should easily get back before it gets dark.”

The terrain turned out to be relatively easy to walk on, young saplings were growing here and there, but there was no thick understory or rocks – groomed in every shade of green imaginable. Above and around them, leaves and needles turned sunlight into green beams. On the ground, branches

and stones were covered with soft mosses and widespread ferns. Compared to their surroundings and massive trees, Gus and Jon felt tiny.

“So, this is what ants feel like,” Gus said, looking up and around after a few minutes’ walk into the forest.

“Impressive, right?” Jon said and touched one of the massive trees. “Gives you a new perspective on things. No distractions, only raw nature. Some people cannot take it. They go crazy or feel anxiety. Too much to be simply with yourself. I, on the other hand, find this peaceful and comforting.” He handed the water bottle to Gus. “Drink some, before you start feeling dizzy.”

“Thanks. I can see that you are more in your element than I am,” Gus said and took a sip from the bottle before handing it back to Jon. He turned his tablet screen on again. “That way,” he pointed a direction away from the lake. “Only two kilometres left.”

After an estimated five-kilometre hike, they were close to the location indicated on Gus’s screen.

“What are we looking for?” Jon asked, already breathing heavier. “All I can see is trees and rocks.”

“Twenty metres ahead,” Gus replied and pointed the way between two man-high rock formations. “Funny ... there are similar rock pillars over there.” He pointed to their left.

“Also over there,” Jon said, pointing to their right.

They were surrounded by rock pillars of different heights. Next to them, where the black dot and exact target was located, grew a massive red cedar.

“Would you look at the size of that thing,” Gus said. “It’s standing precisely where the coordinates are pointing.”

“Is this what he wanted us to find?” Jon asked. “Some stones and a tree?” He sounded disappointed.

To make sure they were in correct place, Gus turned several times 360 degrees, pointing his tablet to all directions.

“It is kind of a bummer,” he said and took another spin. “I must say, that those rocks do seem very similar to Stonehenge.” Gus turned to Jon after a pause. “You know, the rock formation in Wiltshire, England?”

“I know what Stonehenge is, just not where ...” Jon replied with a fake smile and head shake.

“Anyway, I think Dr Wells owes us some gas money. This was a trip for nothing.”

“I agree, those stones have been here for a long time and seen by anyone walking by, nothing extraordinary about them. But the coordinates do point to the middle, one area we can’t access due to that massive tree in the way.” Gus pointed at the tree, which grew larger than anything they had seen so far, with a diameter at least of six metres. “Whatever he wanted us to ‘find,’” Gus made air quotes with his hands, “it must be either under it, up there, or in it.” He pointed up towards the treetop.

“In it!” both shouted at the same time.

“You saw some of those trees on the way here?” Jon asked. “One had a hole to fit a car through it,” he explained excitedly. “You go around that way and I’ll go this way,” he told Gus, who started walking and studying the tree trunk on his way.

After a while they came both around and met on the other side, where the trunk forked out with a large gap between them, filled with rock rubble and covered in a thick layer of moss.

“Does that look natural to you?” Jon asked. “Have you ever seen trees dropping stones and rocks?”

Jon began removing the moss and pulling rocks away. Gus joined the discovery, both now pulling out rocks of all sizes.

Twenty minutes of hard work later, they had managed to pull out all the rocks except for one. The one remaining against the tree was thin, but as wide and tall as a washing machine, and it did not budge no matter how hard they pulled at the same time.

“This is a stubborn one!” Jon shouted and let go. “We will need a different approach.”

“Maybe there is something we could use to pry the last stone away from the tree?” Gus asked while looking around.

“Here’s a sturdy looking piece of wood, but it’s very long!” Jon yelled from further away.

“How long exactly?”

“About from the closest Stonehenge rock to the tree,” Jon said while pulling a sturdy tree trunk with him.

“Maybe we could use the momentum of that Stonehenge rock to break the rock in our way?” He pointed at an already leaning pillar that was closest to them and then laid his hand on the last stone in their way against the tree. “We place the long trunk you found between the leaning stone and the blocking stone. If we topple the leaning stone, it should give enough force to break our rock against the tree. The Stonehenge is our hammer, and the long wood trunk you found is our nail.”

When they’d finished with the setup, they dug out as much ground away around the Stonehenge stone as possible. Then, while Jon held the long tree trunk between two stones, Gus pushed the standing stone towards the tree.

“You think we might get into trouble because of this?” Jon asked while aiming the long trunk to middle of the thin stone on their way. “That stone setup seems quite old.”

“Maybe,” Gus replied, while jumping against the leaning stone. “We’ll put it back as it was.”

“Right,” Jon mumbled back, knowing that would never happen, not with the muscles they had.

The earth lifted under Gus’s feet when the Stonehenge stone fell with its full force. The tree trunk Jon held plunged into the blocking stone, breaking it into several pieces.

“Wahoo!” Jon celebrated and kicked the long wood trunk aside.

Excitedly, they pulled the remaining stone pieces away from the massive tree, revealing an opening. Both leaned in towards it. Jon pulled his small army flashlight from his satchel and switched it on.





## CHAPTER 3

### DISCOVERY

“Ladies first,” Jon said, and offered the way for Gus. “Just kidding, no way you would go first.” He laughed and pushed himself through the opening.

Pushing his satchel ahead of him, he crawled forward using only his toes and forearms. After only a metre or so, he came to an opening inside the tree. Jon stayed on his knees and used his flashlight to investigate his surroundings. The sheer size of the tree struck him even harder now. The opening was as big as a small tool shed. He stood up and had still plenty of headroom from the natural wood ceiling.

“What do you see?” Gus called impatiently.

Jon couldn’t resist. “There is a treasure!”

“What? Wait for me!” Gus yelled and rushed into the narrow hole.

Jon turned the light towards the opening and saw Gus’s hands pushing a satchel through inch by inch. Gus crawled forward like a caterpillar, grunting his way through.

“Here,” Jon said, and offered his hand for Gus, who accepted the help and pulled himself upright with a small jump.

“Thanks man,” he said, and his eyes followed the light beam coming out from Jon’s small but bright flashlight.

“Amazing,” he was able to say. “So, where’s the treasure?” He kept looking around, touching the natural wooden wall around them with Jon smirking behind him. “There’s no treasure, is there?” Gus turned to look at Jon with narrowed eyes.

“Of course not, but it doesn’t mean we can’t look for one. Maybe something above us?”

Jon turned the light upwards, only to observe the same solid wood above as around them. On the ground lay a long dry vine-like rope, as if tossed aside after usage.

“There’s nothing. Except the rest of that piece of root hanging in the middle of the ceiling.” Jon tried to reach it by stretching his right arm as far as he could, but the root was just too high. “Hold this, I will try to jump for it.” He gave his flashlight to Gus.

Jon waved his arms down past his knees as he bent them, and then swung them up again and pushed with his legs as hard as he could, propelling himself upwards like Michael Jordan dunking a basketball into a hoop. He managed to get a grip on the root and stayed mid-air.

“I think it’s just a dried-out root or something,” Jon said, yanking the root as hard as he could, his legs waving around.

The root did not give way. Then, with a loud crack, almost like a whip, the root snapped off from the tree, sending Jon into free fall towards the ground, his arms still raised and his legs forward, as if he were sitting in mid-air. Gus made a heroic attempt to catch his friend by holding his arms out.