

Chapter 21

20,000 Leagues Above the Earth

Barnaby woke when he fell to the floor, hitting his head on a rubber mat. He opened his eyes and looked around, his heart pounding a little faster when he realized that there were six space aliens staring at him.

'Why do you look so scared?' asked the first one, who looked exactly like a Japanese man, except that he wasn't a Japanese man, of course; he was a space alien.

'Because you've assumed human identities to put me at my ease,' said Barnaby, scrambling backwards in the spaceship's cabin. 'And you're going to eat me.'

'Eat him?' asked a rather elegant female space alien with a black bob, red lipstick and a French accent. 'Did he say eat him? I'm a vegetarian, for pity's sake.'

'Who are you?' asked a third person, this time a young male space alien with a posh English accent.

'I'm Barnaby Brocket,' said Barnaby.

'Well, I'm George Abercrombie,' he replied. 'And none of us are aliens, I'm happy to say. May I introduce Dominique Sauvet?' he added, nodding towards the Frenchwoman.

'Hello,' she said.

'Naoki Takahashi,' he continued, pointing at the first man, who quickly bowed from the waist before standing upright again.

'Over there is Matthias Kuznik,' continued George, and a tall blond man stepped forward with a friendly smile on his face.

'Good to meet you,' said Matthias, before turning to George a little apprehensively and shaking his head. 'Should we be getting involved in this?' he asked. 'We don't know who or what he is.'

'Don't worry, Matthias, I'm sure he's perfectly safe. He's just a child.'

'I'm *eight*,' snapped Barnaby, wounded to the core.

'And those two over there,' said George, ignoring this interruption, 'sitting in our recreation area, are Calvin Digler—'

'Yo,' said Calvin, nodding his head while munching on a pretzel.

'Calvin's from across the pond,' said George apologetically. 'You'll have to forgive his manners. The fact that he doesn't have any, I mean.'

Barnaby looked around. 'What pond?' he asked, frowning. 'I don't see any pond.'

'I don't mean a literal pond,' said George. 'The pond! The Atlantic Ocean. Calvin is one of our American cousins.'

'Oh, I see,' said Barnaby. 'Are you all cousins then?'

'No,' said George, confused. 'No, none of us are cousins.'

'But you just said—'

'I didn't mean my literal cousin.'

Barnaby stared at him, then turned to Matthias Kuznik with a questioning expression. 'Why does he not mean anything he says?'

'He's English,' explained Matthias.

'Yes, well, if I might just finish . . . ' continued George. 'The last member of our crew is the little filly sitting next to Calvin.'

'George!' snapped the woman, looking up from her book. 'How many times have I asked you not to refer to me in equine terms?'

'Sorry, old girl,' he said. 'Don't get her riled, Barnaby, there's a good chap. That cat has claws.'

'She's a filly *and* a cat?'

'I can be anything you want me to be, sugar,' said the woman, whose name was Wilhelmina White, winking at him.

Barnaby blushed scarlet from his ears to his toes and didn't know where to look. When he managed

to get a hold of himself again, however, he realized he'd recognized something familiar in her voice.

'You're not Australian, are you?' he asked, looking across at her.

'Close. I'm a Kiwi. Have you been there?'

'No, but I'm from Sydney,' said Barnaby.

'You're a long way from Sydney up here,' remarked George Abercrombie. 'I have to say we were a little surprised to see you floating around out there. We don't get many visitors on *Zelia IV-19*.'

'What's *Zelia IV-19*?' asked Barnaby.

'Our spaceship,' said Naoki Takahashi.

'Perhaps you could let us know what you were doing?' asked George. 'Lashings of apologies, of course, for putting you on the spot like this, but let's be frank: it's a rum deal when an eight-year-old boy just rolls up out of nowhere and accuses a chap of being a space alien when a chap's clearly anything but.'

Barnaby stared at him, blinked a few times, and looked around at the other crew members.

'Fourteen months,' drawled Calvin Diggle from the rest area. 'That's how long we've had to listen to that. You'd better get used to it, kid, if you're planning on sticking around.'

'Steady on,' said George. 'A chap's just wondering what's going on, that's all.'

'It's a long story,' said Barnaby.

'Well, we're not going anywhere.'

'All right then,' he said, starting at the very beginning – and over the next couple of hours, as they sat down to a meal of tomato soup served cold from stainless steel canisters, followed by five square tablets of food, each one a different colour (one that tasted like roast chicken, another that tasted of mashed potatoes, a third of carrots, a fourth of mushy peas, and a fifth that was a delicious crème caramel), Barnaby told them the story of his life, from his early days in Sydney to the terrible thing that happened at Mrs Macquarie's Chair, and then the story of the last month and the extraordinary characters he'd met along the way.

'That's quite a tale,' said Calvin. 'Expect us to buy it, do you?'

'But it's the truth,' insisted Barnaby.

'Then how come you're not floating in here?'

Barnaby thought about it. It was true. He hadn't floated since the moment he'd woken up in the spaceship. His feet were on the ground like everyone else's, and there was nothing in particular to hold him there.

'I don't know,' he said, frowning. 'I don't understand it. I promise that everywhere else I go, I float.'

He stood up and wandered around the cabin, waiting for that particular feeling to come, but it never did. It was very strange to be able to just walk

around like this without floating to the ceiling. Was this what it was like to be normal? It didn't feel normal. And it certainly didn't feel good.

'If anyone should be floating in here, it's us,' said Naoki. 'The air has to be de-pressurized and regulated, otherwise we'd be hitting our heads on the ceiling.'

'My parents would love to have that type of air back home,' said Barnaby. 'Do you think that's what's keeping me on the floor?'

'I doubt it,' said Dominique. 'If what you say is true, then you should still be floating. Unless it has something to do with the air compression. You ever get sore ears?'

'Yes, I do,' admitted Barnaby. 'When I'm made to stay on the ground against my will. They're never agonizing, but there's always a sort of throbbing pain.'

'Ever had a doctor look at them?'

'My parents haven't taken me to a doctor since I was a baby,' explained Barnaby. 'They're embarrassed to let me out of the house.'

Dominique considered this and nodded her head. 'When you get back down to Earth,' she said, 'get your ears checked out.'

'All right,' said Barnaby. 'But how much longer are we all going to be up here anyway? Are you going to live here for ever?'

'No,' said Dominique. 'We're coming to the

end of our mission and then we'll finally get to go home. We only have one more space walk to do—'

'My turn!' insisted Naoki, slamming his fist down on the table and making the tablets of food jump. 'My turn!'

'All right, mate, we know it's your turn,' said Wilhelmina. 'Keep your wig on.'

'Hmm,' grunted Naoki, popping another carrot tablet in his mouth.

'My brother Henry wants to be an astronaut,' said Barnaby. 'He's obsessed with outer space.'

'Well, this isn't outer space, I'm afraid,' said George. 'It's middle space. We're several hundred million light years away from outer space. It's that way . . .' he added, pointing a finger towards the left-hand side of the spaceship's rear before adjusting it ever so slightly. 'No, actually, it's more like that way,' he said, correcting himself.

'Have your parents sent him to Space Academy?' asked Calvin, and Barnaby shook his head.

'No, they want him to be a solicitor like them. They say normal people don't want to go to outer space.'

'Middle space.'

'Any part of space. They've told him that when he's eighteen he should go to university to study law.'

'I know how your brother feels,' said Calvin, sniffing one of the crème caramel tablets, then deciding against it and throwing it back in the pile in the centre of the table.

'Oh, but you've handled it!' cried George, looking aghast.

'Zip it, Prince Charles,' snapped Calvin. 'Trying to tell a story here. You should tell your brother that if he wants to be an astronaut he needs to go to Space Academy. My parents refused to send me when I was a kid. Said I was too stupid.'

'Too stupid?' asked George, still smarting from the way Calvin had spoken to him. 'Oh, God forbid that anyone should think you're stupid. I bet you don't know the capital of Mozambique.'

'Maputo,' said Calvin without a moment's hesitation.

'Or what the square on the hypotenuse is equal to.'

'The sum of the squares on the other two sides.'

'Or where the Duke of Devonshire stands in succession to the throne.'

'Fourteenth,' said Calvin. 'About a million and a half places ahead of you.'

'Well,' said George, sitting back irritably. 'All right, so you're good on general knowledge. If I'm ever involved in a pub quiz I'll drop you a telegram.'

'If you ever drop me a telegram, I'll drop you on your head.'

'All right, boys, that's enough,' said Dominique in an exhausted tone. 'Barnaby was telling us about his brother. And he's our guest. And, Calvin, we've heard how your parents didn't encourage you a hundred times before.'

'I showed them though.' He pointed out through the porthole into the blackness beyond. 'Space,' he said, then pointed all around him. 'Spaceship.' Then he pointed at himself. 'Astronaut.'

'My parents wished for me to become professor of mathematics at Tokyo University,' said Naoki Takahashi. 'Like my mother and grandfather before me.'

'You are a bloody good mathematician, Naoki,' said Wilhelmina. 'He knows all the numbers,' she added, turning to Barnaby and nodding her head enthusiastically. 'Even the really big ones.'

'My parents thought there was something a little embarrassing about my desire to become an astronaut,' said Dominique. 'They wanted me to work in an art gallery and marry a writer who thinks the world doesn't appreciate him enough.'

'Like there's any other sort,' muttered Calvin Digler.

'My parents don't talk to me any more,' said Matthias Kuznik, bowing his head. 'Back home in Germany I am a national disgrace.'

'But you're an astronaut!' said Barnaby. 'They should be proud of you.'

'They *were* proud of me. Once,' he said. 'I was the greatest striker in the history of the German Football Federation. Better than Oliver Bierhoff. Better than Jürgen Klinsmann. Even better than the great Gerd Müller. By the time I turned twenty I had already played for my country thirty times and scored sixty goals.'

'Two in every match,' said Naoki.

'I told you he was good with numbers,' said Wilhelmina.

'Well, no,' said Matthias. 'Sometimes it was more, sometimes it was less, but on average, yes, it was two. Children looked up to me; they had my posters on their walls. But all the time I was playing football I was training to be an astronaut too, and nobody knew.'

'But then they should be twice as proud of you,' said Barnaby. 'You're a great athlete *and* an astronaut.'

'You haven't heard the rest of it yet,' said George.

'It was two weeks before the start of the World Cup,' continued Matthias. 'Everyone expected Germany to win as long as I played in every match. But just before the start of the tournament I got the call from the Space Academy to tell me that my number had been called and I had been selected

for this year-long mission. Only the mission began the following Tuesday. And the World Cup began on Wednesday night.'

'Ah,' said Barnaby.

'Exactly. I had to choose.'

'And which did you choose?' asked Barnaby – at which point the other six turned to stare at him.

'Maybe he is an idiot after all,' said Wilhelmina.

'No, no,' said Barnaby, realizing his mistake. 'Of course. You chose space. I get it.'

'I chose space,' agreed Matthias.

'And he's not much looking forward to going home, are you?' asked George.

'Not much,' he admitted. 'My family will want nothing to do with me.'

'I was supposed to take over the family farm,' said Wilhelmina, who didn't like to be left out of a good meaning session. 'But I didn't want to spend my days shearing sheep and sending cattle off to market. My old man had to put one of my half-wit brothers in charge instead of me when I went to the academy. He hasn't spoken to me since.'

'And what about you?' asked Barnaby of George Abercrombie. 'Does no one in your family speak to you either?'

'I don't have a family,' said George, looking down at the table and rubbing at an invisible stain

there. 'I wanted to be an astronaut because I was lonely. I only wish I had all these chaps' problems.'

Which brought that particular conversation to an abrupt end.