

## Chapter 22

### The Space Walk

Over the next few days Barnaby got to know each of the astronauts a little better and grew to like them all. His favourite pastime on board *Zéla IV-19* was sitting on one of the cushioned seats by the portholes and staring down at the slowly rotating globe that was the planet Earth far below. In the morning he would look out and see North and South America and remember his time on both continents. And there was Canada at the top and the Atlantic Ocean which, when he returned a few hours later and looked out again, led to Ireland. But the best time was at the end of the day, when he could make out Australia and New Zealand, those two familiar shapes that meant home. He was fascinated by the ring of green and blue that acted as a perimeter around the continent, and the brown-grey expanse in the centre. He would stare at it for long periods of time, filling in the places like he used to do in geography class. Perth over

here, a small dot on the west coast. Sydney over here on the south-east. Melbourne at the base, just above Tasmania. Uluru, north of centre. Canberra, where the government worked, down in the south. Byron Bay, where his favourite living writer lived. He'd come to their school once, and for weeks afterwards the queues at the library doors stretched halfway down the corridor. In the evenings he swapped stories of antipodean life with Wilhelmina and was delighted to learn that when the spaceship finally returned to Earth in a few days' time, they would be touching down just outside Sydney.

'So I'll get to go home at last,' said Barnaby. 'You sure will. Happy?'

Barnaby nodded, but for the first time, now that returning home seemed like an actual possibility, he started to feel a little uncertain. He wanted to go home, of course. He'd been trying to get back there for a long time, after all. So why did the prospect suddenly make him feel so nervous?

'Last space walk!' roared Naoki Takahashi on their final morning in space. 'My space walk! Great pride for Naoki Takahashi! Great pride for Japan!'

'I'll get the suit,' said Dominique, pressing a button on a wall; a hidden door opened to reveal a shiny white spacesuit.

'Wow,' said Barnaby, his eyes opening wide as he stared at it.

'This is the most expensive thing on the spaceship,' said Calvin. 'Which is why there's only one of them. If we didn't have one of these, we wouldn't be able to breathe on our space walks.'

'Or go where we want to go,' added George. 'It is made of a special material that allows us to control our movements out there. Otherwise we'd just drift off through middle space and out into outer space.'

'What do you do out there anyway?' asked Barnaby, who was intrigued by the equipment that was being brought up and the extraordinary white suit that Naoki was climbing into.

'We gather air samples,' explained George. 'Also the debris - flozams and jetsams that floats through space. We measure air pressure and temperature. We take readings of sound and light as it travels to and from the Earth.'

'Does this rope feel quite right to you?' asked Dominique of no one in particular. 'The tension feels a little off somehow.'

'We've all gone on space walks, Barnaby,' explained Calvin, ignoring her. 'Dozens of times. There's nothing to it. But it's vital information for the scientists and geologists back on the home planet.'

'Can I go?' asked Barnaby, filled with enthusiasm now; this would be something to tell Henry when he eventually got home. 'I'd love to go on a space walk.'

'Sorry, kid,' said Calvin. 'It's not just for fun, you know. This is important scientific research. We can't have any distractions.'

'Oh, please!' begged Barnaby, and for a moment he thought that the astronauts were going to allow it, but in the end they shook their heads.

Naoki Takahashi made his way through into a separate chamber, which was completely sealed before another door opened slowly on the opposite side and he stepped out into the vast unknown, his movements as graceful as a dancer's. He stretched his arms wide, connected back to *Zéla IV-19* by nothing more than the strong white rope that Dominique had been uncertain about earlier.

'How long will he be out there for?' asked Barnaby, watching his every movement through the porthole, envying him this great adventure.

'Ninety minutes – we have to make sure to watch the clock,' said Wilhelmina. 'He only has enough oxygen for that amount of time. If we leave him out there any longer he'll suffocate and die.'

It was difficult to make out exactly what Naoki was doing. Every so often he would remove some scientific instrument from one of his pockets, hold it out in front of him for a minute or so, then replace it in his pocket and zip it up. Sometimes he would take an unusual-shaped bottle, open the lid, wait, re-seal it and zip that up too. It all seemed to be going perfectly.