

# BLACK TABLE

ANTTIMATTI  
PENNANEN

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This is a work of fiction and facts. References to the 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 of this novel.

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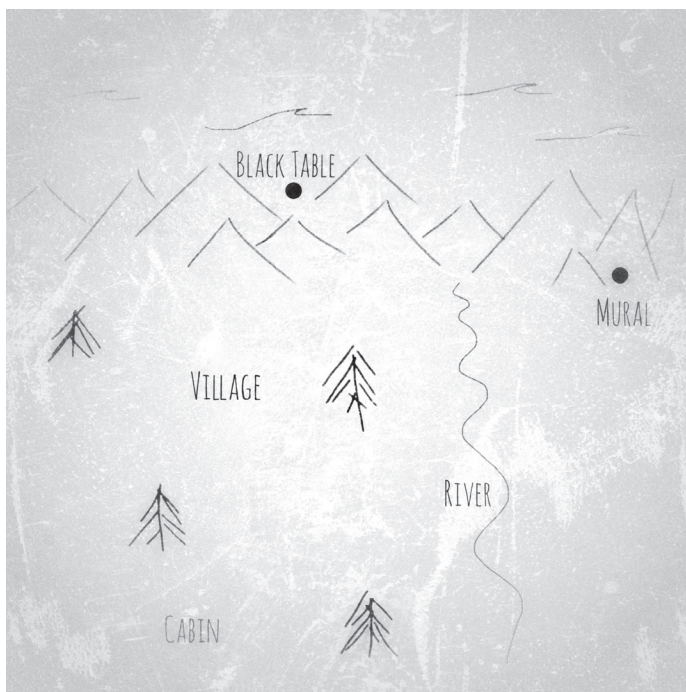
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## MAP OF NEW THATHO



### **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. 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            | 21  |
| CHAPTER 3: DISCOVERY            | 41  |
| CHAPTER 4: CREATURE             | 55  |
| CHAPTER 5: NEW THATHO           | 69  |
| CHAPTER 6: ESCAPE               | 89  |
| CHAPTER 7: U-TURN               | 109 |
| CHAPTER 8: THE EYE              | 125 |
| CHAPTER 9: AZONIA               | 155 |
| CHAPTER 10: THE TRENCH          | 169 |
| CHAPTER 11: BETRAYAL            | 181 |
| CHAPTER 12: POLITICS            | 201 |
| CHAPTER 13: OPERATION HAIL MARY | 235 |
| CHAPTER 14: UNITY               | 261 |
| CHAPTER 15: “JUMP”              | 273 |







# 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 night 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.

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.

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 the 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 days' 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. 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 *The Lord of the Rings* who had just entered the hall. Azog had a perfect home-made mask, but his eyes looked terrified by 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 visibly relaxed.

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, à 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. While young single males usually decorated 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 like what people would term 'normal'.

"Today, Dr Wells will talk about the 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 in a cup in front of him. His friends from Hogwarts liked it. At the warm food buffet, 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's 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 the 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 glass doors. 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 check 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 the other 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 to take photos of their idol.

“I don’t get it, why are people still busy queuing for smoothies when one of the greatest 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 the 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.

The 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 kilometres 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 – “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."

The 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 been 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 the 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 that went 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 grip 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 the paramedics who performed their routine on Dr Wells.

“He is in a cardiac arrest,” declared one, kneeling next to an 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 the portable defibrillator on his body.

"Clear!" the paramedic operating the defibrillator shouted.

Both lifted their hands into the 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 lives 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 a feeling of helplessness. Gus, instead, kept thinking it was all part of some nightmare he would wake up from any time now. He did not. The paramedic operating the defibrillator opened his small red medical bag, with its white cross embedded on top, and pulled out a long hypodermic needle.

"Adrenaline?" he asked his colleague, who confirmed it with a firm nod. He placed the needle firmly against Dr Wells's thigh, sunk the needle right through his clothes and watched the liquid disappear into Dr Wells's leg. When done, he quickly pulled out the needle out.

"Again!" he shouted.

"Clear!" the other paramedic shouted, and all hands moved 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 mobile phones.

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

Gus agreed and they both walked out through the exit next to them, catching the shuttle that was 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 the next day.



Once back at the hotel they passed reception and took an elevator to the 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, 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 have 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 onto his bed and pushed aside brochures and collectables to reveal his signed treasure: a black book with planets and galaxies printed on the front cover and Dr Wells's picture next to a short blurb on 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 hardcover. Jon opened it and 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. He read out loud what Dr Wells had written down, "*minus lampshade dreamer.*" He gave Jon a puzzled look and then returned his gaze to the words in 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 was 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 that 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. He 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 of 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 the 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 the 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 – 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 lead somewhere. They did not. He leaned back, with his back against the bed, 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 on 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 by 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 in his search engine. Nothing. Another lamp lit up in Gus’s head. “It won’t work in a 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 that would pinpoint an exact location with just three words. He found the article

interesting as it turned out that rescue personnel and law enforcement were already using it to find lost people.

Gus opened the homepage 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 instantly indicated the location as a black dot surrounded by a white circle. Gus felt his pulse rate going up and his breathing accelerating as 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, now standing 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 out." He looked straight in Gus's eyes with determination. "These were his last words after all, kinda. Or, technically, my name was his last word, but you know what I mean?"

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

“I’m in. I will go to reception and ask if we can get a car rental directly from the hotel.” Jon picked up the hotel key from Gus’s night table, gave a fist bump to Gus and hurried out.