

EARTHBOUND

by Alison Evans



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When I see Earth for the first time it looks exactly how it does in the pictures, like a blue and white marble. As we get closer, the continents reveal themselves in shades of green and yellow.

'Look, Pen! Isn't it beautiful?' Dad says, leaning across me to peer out the window as we really start to descend. 'It looks even better than I remembered it.'

'Stay in your seat,' I mimic back what he said to me when we first took off from Callisto two days ago.

'Pen,' he scolds, but he doesn't mean it.

'Passengers, please remain in your seats until the no-seatbelt sign has been switched off,' the overhead announcement comes, and we grin at each other.

We touch down with barely a rumble and Dad gives me one of his Significant Looks. 'You'll remember this forever,' he says.

'Dad, I know.'

'This is our home,' Dad says.

I roll my eyes. 'Dad! I know.'

I open my messages cause I said I'd ping my best friend Nerida as soon as we landed, but my dev won't connect to the Earth web. I turn it off and on again, run a quick diagnostic, but nothing.

'Oi Dad, is your dev working?'

He taps at the screen, then frowns. 'No. Weird ...'

‘What if something is wrong at home?’ I say, my heart beating faster. ‘The radiation wave was coming, what if something bad happened? I told Nerida I would message her as soon as we got here to make sure she’s okay.’

Dad sighs. ‘They’ll be okay – remember when there was the big radiation spell when you were seven? It happens, and we knew Jupiter’s radiation was going to be extra strong this week.’

I shudder, remembering the brownouts. But why would our devs be affected? With a knot in my stomach, we keep going.

The gravity’s stronger on Earth and it takes a few steps to feel like I can walk properly – I hear the motor in Dad’s wheelchair turn up a bit to compensate. ‘

Just like I remember,’ he says. ‘Come on, let’s go.’ He leads us away from the terminal to be Welcomed to Country.

After that, we get the drones to take our bags to our accommodation and head to the spaceport train station. It’s open to the Earth air and it’s so warm. Nothing like the perfectly conditioned air of Callisto’s domes – there’s no dome! I move a bit closer to Dad as I look up at the open sky and my heart starts beating faster. It’s scary, but kind of cool, and I breathe deep to relax. There are so many smells and I don’t recognise any of them. The train rail’s above us, and below the tracks is a carpet of green. I see a furry little animal scurrying away and I yelp – it’s the first wild animal I’ve ever seen. Not to mention how many insects there are buzzing around like jewels in the air.

‘Train’s coming.’

The train glides up silently. Dad leads us onto it and picks a spot near the window, I sit opposite him. As we move away from the spaceport the sky opens up and I gasp at the blue wideness of it. The clouds are puffy and white, tall mountains of what I know is water, but I don’t understand how it could be.

‘Southern Cross is only a couple of minutes away – that’s the station in central Naarm,’ Dad says. ‘The one Valli works at.’

As the train moves I can’t tear my eyes away from the sky. A flock of cockatoos passes by and my chest swells. I’ve seen them on screens but it’s different seeing them out where they’re meant to be, flying free and wild and real.

Soon skyscrapers and eucalypts block most of the sky from view, and the greenery becomes denser the closer we get to our destination. Even through the train windows I can hear the birds calling. With all this, I wonder how home is going, quiet in the radiation wave.

I try to get into my messages again but the signal isn't being picked up. There's just a weird static in my feed.

'We can see if there's a patch near Valli's,' Dad says when he sees me tapping at the screen. 'Maybe we just need to reconnect to the Earth web.'

'That shouldn't matter.' I frown. 'And anyway, it's the whole dev! Not just messages. Look, the time's all wrong and everything.'

The train empties almost completely when we get to Southern Cross and everyone's bustling around, on devs and screens, chatting to each other. As we leave the elevator, the scent of cooking fungi chips hits me and my mouth waters. I look around for Dad's cousin Valli, but they're not here yet.

There are heaps of different trains, the ones that go across the continent as well as the local lines. Most of them are two storeys. Callisto doesn't really have transport like this; the gravity means it's easier to make things hover. Valli works with the timetabling, making sure every train has a spot to park when it passes through.

'Why don't we get chips while we wait for Valli?' Dad says.

The crunch is the same but the taste is different. Better? I'm not sure. Eventually, we see Valli across the train station, and their kid Jaya is with them. They're my age and we've met a couple of times on holo.

They wave at me and I wave back. Dad and Valli start yacking away as we start towards their apartment. They live just above the station.

'Have you heard anything from Callisto?' I ask.

Valli shakes their head. 'Not since the radiation started getting worse. But that's normal, right?'

'It's not unexpected,' Dad says. 'When I first moved to Callisto there was a whole week we didn't have any communication with Earth. Everything was fine, the Masies had it all under control.'

I swallow and nod.

'By the way, don't call any of the androids here Masies,' Valli says to me and Dad. 'It's not something they like. On Earth they're citizens, they've been delinked from the central AI. Just ask for their names like you would anyone else.'

'Thanks Valli,' I say, grateful they've told us before I messed anything up.

'So you have to tell me everything about Callisto,' Jaya says as we head towards the elevators. 'Everyone at school thinks it's cool that you live there.'

I don't tell them that everyone in my class thought it was so uncool that I was going to Earth for the holidays. 'It's way warmer here. The gravity is weird though. I feel really tired and we've barely been here an hour!'

'Can you float on Callisto? Kat reckons she went there and she floated but I reckon she was lying.'

I laugh. 'No, we don't float. The base only has a little less gravity than here but I guess I just didn't think I'd notice the difference.'

'I can't wait for a coffee,' Dad says as we wait in front of the elevators.

Valli crosses their arms and rolls their eyes. 'You're in Naarm and you want replicator coffee? Come on, I'm showing you the best spot.'

Valli drags us away from the elevators. As we use one of the walkways to cross the street, more birds fly overhead.

'It's so strange, so many animals everywhere,' I say to Jaya.

They frown. 'Aren't there animals on Callisto?'

'Not like this. I mean, some robos are animal shaped. But there aren't any wild animals around. I've never even seen any before today.'

Jaya shakes their head. 'That's a shame.'

We get to the cafe, in a skyscraper covered in vines and other plants. Out on the balcony a few birds are feeding on flowers.

When our drinks come, Dad smacks his lips after the first sip.

'Not bad,' he says. 'Callisto's is still better. There's nothing like hydroponic coffee beans.'

Valli laughs and shakes their head. 'I'm sure it's all true.'

By bedtime there's still no news from Callisto. I tap my dev and the screen lights up with static again. I try everything, and Jaya even tries the emergency hotspot. It's like the one we have back home that everyone can access just in case the network goes down. It does on Callisto sometimes because of the radiation, but Earth's hasn't been down since before Jaya was born, they reckon.

I groan and unstrap my dev from my wrist, chucking it across Jaya's room.

Do you want me to have a go?' Jaya asks, their eyebrows knitted.

'Sure, but I think it's hopeless,' I say, sighing.

'Is it making any weird sounds?' Jaya picks the dev up off the floor.

I shake my head. 'Haven't checked. It's always on silent.'

Jaya opens messages and turns up the volume as we watch the static. At first I can't hear anything, but after a moment I think I hear something low, pulsing.

'Can you hear that?' I whisper.

Jaya turns up the volume a little. 'What is it?'

'I dunno.' It's sort of rhythmic, like a heartbeat but not as regular. I can't shake the feeling that there's something else; we're missing parts of it.

We're silent for a few moments, but Jaya shakes their head.

'Maybe our parents will know,' Jaya yawns.

'I guess we should sleep,' I say, yawning too. 'Dad's got a hectic schedule for us tomorrow.'

As I try to sleep, thinking about the sound and the static, I listen to the possums on the balcony, the chirping of bats outside. The sky's so clear and the stars are all different. I wasn't prepared for that. The trains sound a bit like the enviro stabilisers on Callisto when you're up real close, and the rhythm of that helps me drift off.

We get up early and the sunlight streaming in is beautifully warm – Jaya says they get their electricity from the windows.

'You're up early,' Dad says, pretending to be shocked. 'I didn't even have to drag you out.'

'Da-ad,' I say, cheeks warming, but Jaya doesn't seem to notice. 'No news from home?' I hope they're doing okay, and wonder if Nerida's warm enough. I remember being cold when we went through the radiation burst when I was little. The radiation waves sometimes mess with the temperature regulators. It doesn't take long for the Masies to fix, but sometimes it's a few hours.

He shakes his head. 'Not yet. But we've got a big day of sightseeing ahead of us,' he says, clapping his hands together. 'I've made us a schedule.'

I groan and make eye contact with Jaya, who giggles.

'My dev's making a weird noise, Dad. Is yours?'

When he opens his dev to the same place as mine, it's making the same rhythmic noise that sounds half-empty.

He frowns. 'Odd. Very odd.'

Dad drags me and Jaya around the city while Valli's at work. We go to the launching place where the Kaufman family left Earth all those years ago, then we go to the aquarium, and three different cafes. All the while I'm checking my dev for any change, but it's way too loud outside for me to hear anything and I can't tell if the static is the same or not. We're out all day until Valli messages to say we're invited to the communal dinner on the rooftop when we get back.

The rooftop is a bunch of picnic tables surrounded by a garden with fruit trees and veggies growing. I trail my hand through some basil and pause. My mouth waters at the smell; it's so fresh and real.

Me and Jaya scoff our food and then they show me the telescope. It's a pretty big one, and we look up at the stars. 'Deneb, one of the androids that lives in our building, they showed me all this stuff, taught me about the stars,' Jaya says. 'They're working on some paintings of the sky; sometimes they work up here.'

'At home Jupiter's always in the sky. It's nice to see so many stars.'

'We can see Jupiter from here with just our eyes, didja know that?' they ask, pointing. 'It looks like a big red star but it doesn't twinkle. You see it?'

It takes me a second. 'Wow.'

'Here.' Jaya motions for me to look through the telescope and I can see Jupiter in more detail. 'With more magnification you'd be able to see Callisto.'

I go to take a picture, then remember my dev isn't working so I can't send it to Nerida anyway. 'Take a picture for me?'

As Jaya points their dev into the telescope, I gasp. 'We need to magnify it. My dev! We have to boost the signal. On Callisto when there's a brownout, the Masies boost the web stations, or the scanners, or whatever we need if it's important. What if my dev is receiving something but isn't powerful enough to display it properly? Something from Callisto.'

I don't know if it's really a signal, but I have a hunch.

'We should ask Deneb, they know way more about tech stuff than anyone I know. They might know what to do.'

Jaya sends them a message; they're on duty at the station, so we get permission from our parents to go down to meet them.

An owl flies overhead. The station's lit dimly so that birds know it's night-time, but enough that we can see where we're going.

We pass rows of rural trains waiting in their homes; one of them will be crossing the continent. As we walk the width of the station, metro trains pass us above and below the walkways.

Jaya introduces me to Deneb when we get inside the office and I show them my dev. They scan it, but shake their head.

‘I think you’re right, it is some kind of signal,’ Deneb says. ‘But maybe we need something to help it amplify it ...’

‘Do you think it’s because it’s from Callisto?’ I ask. ‘The same thing is happening to my dad’s dev as well.’

‘That could be possible.’ They frown.

‘Do you know any androids from Callisto? Maybe they could help.’

Deneb looks at the clock displayed on the window. ‘I finish in half an hour, I’ll message my friend Arcturus. She came to Earth a few years ago but was made on Callisto. We’ll meet on the roof.’

Me and Jaya go up to the roof again. There are still a few people milling around, but dinner is all packed up. Dad and Valli say we can stay up here for a bit longer; Jaya manages to convince them we want to keep using the telescope.

As we wait for the androids, my stomach fizzes with anticipation. Jaya’s feet swing back and forth on the bench we’re sitting on. There’s a wet, squishy sound and I look around to see what it is.

‘Bats,’ Jaya says, pointing. ‘They love the fruit trees.’

As the elevator doors open, the static sound on my dev sharpens a little, becomes louder. Deneb and their friend come towards us.

‘Looks like my arrival changed something – you were right,’ Arcturus says to me. We introduce ourselves and I give her the dev. The sound is more rhythmic now.

‘What’s going on?’ I ask.

‘I think your dev and my body have some Callisto-specific metals inside them. Combined with something about Earth, we’re able to receive it.’

‘Could the gravity be a factor?’ I ask.

'It could be any number of things,' Arcturus says. She closes her eyes. 'I'm going to try and piggyback off one of the satellites.' After a few seconds, more layers begin to emerge from the static. All different sounds coming together in harmony. And then I realise.

'It's a song.' I laugh. 'A very strange song.'

'Can you tell where it's coming from?' Jaya asks. 'Callisto?'

I know before Arcturus shakes her head that it's not from home. Callistan music doesn't sound like this.

'No,' Arcturus says. 'It's coming from beyond Callisto, much further.'

'Beyond?' I ask. 'But we haven't been further than Callisto yet.'

'That's right.'

My breath hitches. 'You mean ... it's someone else?'

Arcturus smiles. 'It would seem so.'

My dev lights up in Arcturus's hands and dozens of messages are coming through from Nerida from the last couple of days.

Can you hear it?

Pen!!!!

This is the WORST time for you to go on holidays

The radiation did something to the station's receptors and we're getting a message from somewhere near Sirius. That's LIGHT YEARS away!

I look up at the stars above and there are thousands, with so much space between them. How many solar systems, galaxies, beings are out there? Whoever they are, I think, they sent us a gift in the form of a song.

For now, we listen.

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See you in the future!



FUTURE
you

