

OMNI – Teddy Quest

Sample: Prologue and Chapter 1

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Prologue

Long ago, on a hot afternoon, a boy named Ptuk carefully walked into a fast-flowing river barefoot, beyond the Big Hill. He was all by himself, which made his adventure even more risky. While he looked around, the brown-haired boy soon found a cage that he had made himself, hidden under the clear, rushing water.

Ptuk was an early modern human, part of the species *Homo sapiens*. He was different from Neanderthals because he had a greater ability for complex thinking. Ptuk was a lively and energetic young man who always checked his handmade fish trap with excitement. Even if there was no fish caught, he didn't mind much, just like a modern sports fan who doesn't expect their favourite team to win every game.

Ptuk used a different method of fishing that didn't rely on small bone hooks, nets, or spears to catch a fish. Instead, his clever idea didn't even need him to be there. This intrigued him. Could he find other ways to accomplish tasks without being directly involved?

After his first failed attempt at building his device, Ptuk didn't get disheartened and learned from his mistakes. He kept testing and improving his device inside the river, despite the criticism from many of the elders who preferred the traditional ways of catching fish.

Early on, Ptuk discovered how powerful the flowing water could be. His first cage was destroyed because he didn't tie the threaded vines tightly enough around the stick frame. He also found that securely planting the device between two rocks under the water prevented the strong currents from sweeping it away downstream.

Ptuk also realized that the entrance to his trap needed to be big enough for a fish to swim in, but small enough to keep it from escaping. With that modification, he began to think of other changes to catch more fish. If he could provide many fish to the community, then surely the elders and everyone else would be proud of him!

Ptuk took his trap out of the water and carefully placed it on the grassy riverbank. He checked and saw that there was no fish inside. Upon further inspection, he noticed that the small sack attached near the trap's entrance was empty. He refilled it with some dead bugs that he had brought with him. By leaving the bag slightly open, some of the treats would float in the water and attract a hungry fish. Feeling optimistic he would find a fish on his next visit, Ptuk put his cage back into the river and securely positioned it underwater.

While walking through the forest back to his community shelter, Ptuk decided to take a break and sit on the ground. He leaned against a tall tree and listened to the soft, high-pitched sounds around him. Despite being frightened by many wilderness sounds, he found this one pleasant. Ptuk eventually spotted a small red bird singing from a branch in a nearby tree that was too high for him to reach.

As he watched the bird, which occasionally glanced at him, Ptuk had a new idea. He wondered if he could build a cage to catch a bird, not to eat it, but to keep it and feed it inside his shelter so that the little animal could sing for him.

Immediately, Ptuk's inquisitive mind started questioning how he could build a bird-catching cage that would balance on a tree branch. Catching small flying creatures presented new challenges for his mind to solve. He wondered how the wind might affect the cage. Could it blow it off the tree limb and potentially destroy it on the ground, or carry it far away and shatter it deep inside the wilderness? To Ptuk, it seemed like the wind and the river were very protective of the birds and fish, especially against hunters who tried to take them away for their own benefit.

The little bird continued to sing, feeling safe from the human below. Ptuk listened with joy and wondered how such a small creature could fly when he could not. He wondered why birds grew wings while humans have arms. Ptuk imagined how he could spy on large animals from the sky if he could fly too. However, he was stuck on the ground and always at risk of being attacked. Suddenly, the red bird flapped its wings and flew away, leaving Ptuk gazing up with sad and envious eyes as he watched it disappear into the sky.

Now, fast-forward 40,000 years. Physically, modern humans have not changed much. We did not become giants. Yet our cognitive abilities improved significantly.

This has resulted in the creation of various spoken languages, beautiful art, and impressive architectural structures, such as the ancient pyramids in Egypt, the massive Roman Colosseum in Italy, the intricate medieval castles in Europe, and the ambitious Panama Canal in Central America.

How did such small people create such enormous things?

Despite the relatively short time it took to construct these monumental projects, birds could still fly in the sky and humans could not. So, in tribute—or perhaps in mockery—of our magnificent building feats, birds had simply found new places to land, perch, nest, and take off from.

Then, in the early 20th century, Wilbur Wright and his brother Orville successfully demonstrated powered flight for the first time in recorded history near the town of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, USA. Their simple flying machine had non-flapping wings, allowing for a limited degree of pilot control. With this breakthrough, humans were no longer limited to the ground, and birds were no longer the only creatures capable of flying.

Since December 17, 1903, humans have rapidly advanced airplane and jet technology to become better, faster, safer, and more efficient. Within a span of 70 years, some humans had even managed to break through Earth's atmosphere and fly into outer space. On July 20, 1969, American astronaut Neil Armstrong famously declared, "The Eagle has landed," when the spacecraft named "Eagle" carried two men to the surface of the moon. This was a nod to our feathered friends, as the name of the spacecraft was inspired by the national bird of the United States, the bald eagle.

Maybe birds felt jealous of people who had become skilled at travelling in the sky and beyond. Or perhaps birds were content to fly within the Earth's framework, which they had been doing for the past million years. After all, birds were not designed for space travel. In contrast, humans have developed collective intelligence through communication and education to overcome their sky-high limitations. Moreover, humans are willing to explore the vastness of the universe despite the risks and dangers involved. Space exploration provides opportunities for curiosity and creativity, testing new scientific theories and developing increasingly complex engineering systems.

The success of humans living in space has led to the creation of a unique Earth-orbiting space station. It consists of corridors that connect an elongated elevator shaft to a circular ring containing residences, research facilities, a landing dock, and administrative premises. The space station is called OMNI and its name is displayed in enormous blue letters against its shiny silver outer skin, like a tattoo visible to the entire cosmos.

Chapter One

That Lucky Family

It was not uncommon for friends, relatives, neighbours, and even strangers to refer to the Quinns as that lucky family. Perhaps it was jealousy or admiration that fascinated the losing entrants in the biggest non-financial lottery that ever took place in human history. Nonetheless, most of the locals were proud of the fact that the winners lived in southern Ontario, in the beautiful country of Kanata.

It all started with a contest by the Nova Terra Cosmic Commission. They were looking for one family to spend a year on the space station OMNI for free. More than 800 million families from all over the world entered the contest, but only one could win. In return, the Commission would learn how a human family behaves in space and receive valuable long-term data. Scientists had already learned a lot about how various living things such as men, women,

chimpanzees, dogs, cats, spiders, and even fruit flies adapt to living in space, but they had never studied how a family would manage in space. They were curious about how weightlessness and artificial gravity affect humans and wanted to learn from the family's experiences living on the space station.

The human family is a social institution that has evolved over time. It is made up of related individuals who share genetics and culture, and it serves as an imperfect source of understanding, learning, and love. Sometimes, family members can fight with each other or with other families, but fundamentally, families have been responsible for the advancement of the human race over millions of years.

Some scholars believed that any human family living in space would be like any trained astronaut. However, others argued that the average family might not be able to handle the many dangers of space habitation, just as there are some families who struggle to function normally on Earth. Still, others pointed out that unrelated astronauts function like a family in space.

All of this debate led to a question: How would children react to living in space? Finding the answer to this question would be crucial to planning any long-term human space travel throughout the universe.

The Nova Terra Cosmic Commission wanted to select a family as their research subjects or pioneers. If, over time, the parents or children experienced any space-related health or psychological issues, the NTCC was willing to take that risk to satisfy their own curiosity. However, they downplayed any negative outcomes and focused on emphasizing the excitement and glory of winning their global contest to be broadcast worldwide.

"Come on, it's getting to the good part of the show!" exclaimed 12-year-old Karen Quinn as she sat on one end of the couch in her family's cozy living room. Her younger siblings, 10-year-old Jarrett and 7-year-old Portia, joined her. Jarrett carried two large bowls of buttered popcorn, while Portia held her beloved brown teddy bear. Both of them sat on the floor with their legs stretched out. All three kids were watching the 2-metre-wide diagonal telescreen displaying a dull interview with a Senior Director from the Nova Terra Cosmic Commission.

Jarrett lifted one of the popcorn bowls above his head for Karen to grab, while he and Portia munched on the buttery snack in the other bowl.

"Did they announce the winners yet?" asked their mother, who came into the living room and sat next to Karen in the middle of the couch. Valerie couldn't help but notice how much her eldest daughter resembled her at that age.

"No, not yet, Mom," Karen replied.

"I hope the winners come from Ecuador," said Jarrett.

"Eca-what?" Portia asked, confused. "What's that?"

"Ecuador," Karen corrected him. "It's a country in South America!"

"Yeah? Well, at least I know what a sacrifice bunt is," Jarrett replied.

"Nobody cares what that is! But everyone knows that Ecuador is a country in South America!"

"Where's Dad?" asked Portia, wanting them to stop their bickering.

The sound of the back door closing could be heard.

“He’s coming now.”

The telescreen displayed footage of the early construction of the OMNI space station from two years ago.

“It’s dead outside,” announced Brent as he sat in an empty section on the couch.

“That’s because everybody is already inside somewhere, waiting to hear the winners of the Contest,” explained Karen. “Want some popcorn, Dad?”

Brent declined the offer and rubbed his hands together to warm up from the chilly autumn afternoon outside.

Brent and Valerie had been married for 15 years, after graduating from the University of Toronto. They had met while pursuing doctoral degrees in Cosmic Science. Brent was tall and handsome with a stylish crew-cut, while Valerie had a sweet smile and wore her hair in a ponytail. During their time on campus, they fell in love.

“Blah, blah, blah,” complained Jarrett to the telescreen. “Get on with it. We want to know who the winners are!”

The Quinn couple was hesitant to enter the global contest, but their relatives and friends convinced them to participate. They were nominated by others because they fit the criteria for the kind of family the Nova Terra Cosmic Commission was seeking. Brent submitted the multi-page entry form reluctantly to appease his supporters, not thinking they would actually win. He believed that there were many other families worldwide who were more qualified than them.

Six months after submitting their contest entry, the Nova Terra Cosmic Commission disagreed with Brent's modest self-assessment. A committee of fifteen top scientists had

scrutinized a narrowed-down list of 1,000 family finalists, and the NTCC's final decision was kept secret until it would be revealed during an internationally broadcast telescreen special today. The publicity leading up to the event was an instant victory for the NTCC, who had succeeded in generating interest among regular people in a highly promoted campaign to appear more inclusive and shatter their reputation for being exclusive and elitist.

The moment everyone had been waiting for had finally arrived. The popcorn spilled onto the floor as each member of the Quinn family watched in disbelief when the winners' names, location, and photos were flashed across the telescreen. And it was them! "We won!" gasped Karen. "We're going to the OMNI!" Within seconds, all of their Communication Devices (CommDevs) began ringing with incoming calls. Known and unknown people alike were expressing their congratulations in a frenzy of messages. It was impossible to keep up with the onslaught of incoming notifications.

Within minutes, the front door alarm began to flash and ring frantically. There was also loud hammering of fists on the front door, and astonished faces began appearing at all of the windows, as if they were a recently arrived alien species.

Anxiously, Brent closed his own CommDev and ran to the front door. He opened it slightly to address the growing mob outside. It was an honest but foolish mistake since the flood of frantic people could have burst into the little house and endangered the rest of the family members. Instead, eight burly men, wearing dark grey suits, dark eye-shields, and no smiles, entered the Quinns' house like coordinated soldiers.

The brawny guards were followed by two well-dressed women and a sharply dressed man, who introduced themselves as Executive Officers from the Nova Terra Cosmic Commission. Brent joined his family in the living room, where they were anxiously holding each other. Meanwhile, the guards searched the house to make sure there was no one else inside. Once they confirmed the house was empty, the guards quickly left to control the growing crowd of gawking onlookers outside.

Meanwhile, Clara Holt, a woman with blonde hair and blue lipstick, stepped up to talk to the tense Quinns. She asked them to confirm in front of her, as a witness, if they truly wanted to be the first family to live in space on the OMNI for a year.

Everything was happening very fast. CommDevs kept bothering the Quinns. People in the neighbourhood and curious strangers gathered outside. Security guards were there to make sure they didn't come too close to the house.

Brent and Valerie asked their kids if they really wanted to live on the space station OMNI. The children were thrilled and said "yes" right away. Portia even talked to her teddy bear and asked if he wanted to come along.

To make it official, each member of the Quinn family signed Clara's NTCC-issued CommDev using their own thumbprints as signatures.

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