

"Another day, another planet" were Danny's first thoughts when he landed on Planet Josh 275.

Landing actually wasn't a particularly good description. We'd long since discovered that most space travel was long, boring and expensive.

Nowadays, space flights were reserved for tourists and were closer to a one hour edited highlights experience than a long trip with risky take offs and landings plus all those long boring "are we there yet" days in between the sights.

Day to day space travel was a bit like the teleporting system in Star Trek. You typed in your destination, the predictive menus helping you to narrow down your choice, and then you pressed the "Go" button.

Seconds later, you were there.

Wherever there was this time.

Anywhere in the universe, so long as you'd typed the name in correctly.

Of course, the early models had got it a bit wrong occasionally. It took a few generations of the Planet Nav devices before they got reliable enough to use. Early versions had got the destination reasonably right but often missed the surface of the land. So you'd arrive in mid-air - OK if you'd remembered to wear an emergency parachute - or sometimes deep below the ground. Which was more of a problem as it's difficult to press buttons when you're surrounded by granite or magma.

But nowadays, the Planet Nav devices were predictable. Almost boringly so. The advantage was that they got you to your destination fast and you landed in one piece.

The science behind this was complicated. It had been born out of quantum physics but also owed quite a lot to witchcraft and sorcery. Fortunately, all the complicated calculations had been reduced to a few million simultaneous equations and were handled with ease by even the most basic computer chip.

So all Danny had done was type in the name Planet Josh 275 and a few seconds later he was standing in the centre of the only inhabited part of this distant planet.

If you looked at Planet Josh 275 from space, you'd be hard pushed to distinguish it from the thousands of other blue green planets dotted around the universe.

That was another odd thing about the future.

Our governments had spent years and billions of tax payer dollars stopping us from finding out that aliens existed.

Then we started traveling across the universe and they couldn't hide the facts about aliens any more.

Aliens were boring. 99% of aliens were like us: humanoid in form. Worried about whether they looked good in whatever they were wearing. Pestering their children to do well in their school tests. Buying the latest gadgets and ignoring all the fancy new functions that the advertising had persuaded them to buy.

The other 1% of aliens were nothing like us at all. So we came to the mutually beneficial solution of ignoring each other.

Danny's job took him all over the universe. Which sounds exciting but, like a lot of things in the future, didn't live up to the hype.

Each planet was similar. Danny's job was a bit like IT support. He had to keep the computers working so that the other people on the planet could catalogue it and note down anything out of the ordinary.

Josh 275 was uninhabited, like the previous dozen planets that Danny had visited during his career.

The base was a set of space cabins, a bit like freight containers, linked together by corridors that had a striking resemblance to the corridors that link airports to planes. The outside air was breathable, so there were no fancy airlocks. Most planets had roughly the same amount of gravity as Earth, so the explorers didn't need space suits either.

The crew on the base each worked six month shifts, followed by a six month break to allow them to return to normality. In practice, most of them including Danny moonlighted and did a second six month shift with a different company, so they got no time off.

Which suited Danny's social skills. He'd never really got on very well with other people. So the almost anonymous life of being the resident geek on a distant planet wasn't much different from how he felt normally. A complete outsider.

Everyone on the crew had their own specialist jobs to perform.

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Like lots of innovations, the Planet Nav system was never originally intended to transport people to distant planets. It was born out of the problems associated with flying around the world.

Technology has a habit of getting stuck because the cost of developing something new is prohibitive. So it was with flight. The basic design of jet planes didn't change much for over 500 years. Sure, the fuel changed when we finally ran out of affordable oil. But the idea of queuing in a departure lounge for an hour or two and then sitting in cramped conditions for a few more hours didn't change much at all.

Then a bored student twisted a quantum physics experiment - the kind where an electron is moved from one side of a river to the other - and discovered that complete creatures could be moved at the press of a button and reconstituted somewhere else. What's more, they'd still be alive and the process had the added benefit of replacing decayed or damaged body cells with perfect ones.

In much the same way that it took a long time to prove scientifically that bees could fly, no-one came up with a convincing theory as to why the Planet Nav system worked. But at the same time, no-one really worried. They could get from New York to Sydney in under a minute so long as they had an intelligent child nearby to program the device for them.

It was only when the first hamster landed on the moon as a result of a mischievous and reckless dare that the possibility of using the same technology for interplanetary travel were discovered.

Of course, there were plenty of vested interests who didn't want the Planet Nav to gain popularity. Governments had to work out new ways to tax travelers and whole industries and infrastructures disappeared once the device became affordable for almost anyone.

The other losers were the astronauts who had set out to explore the solar system around Proxima Centauri. They'd been put into deep freeze for their hundred year each way journey and weren't best pleased when they were met at the other end by a group of drunken party goers.

Anyway, the Planet Nav system worked well most of the time. You could select your destination from the built in menus, select the objects to transport and press Go. And unlike the initial versions of the device, all modern units automatically followed with you on the journey, making the interplanetary equivalent of forgetting your keys a distant nightmare.