



## Eden Park

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### PROLOGUE

#### Initial contact

The crack spread along the road, eating its way through the surface as if it had jaws of steel. Bricks snapped in two as it broke through the Parkers' garden wall and then moved on up the drive without stopping. Tiny blue flames erupted across the surface, and there was a clicking noise which sounded a lot like Vincent flicking his old lighter open and shut when he did the crossword with his uncle. Sometimes Victor got so jumpy that his arms and legs would start to twitch. You could be forgiven for thinking the [Fleas of Belvedev](#) were driving him mad. He had to do at least eight squats, run round the house three times and then say two words backwards without looking stupid to get things back under control and be able –

**We'll take a closer look at those inter-terrestrial fleas later on in the story, along with their secret mission (known only to a very few) and where to find them (also generally unknown). 'Later' may not necessarily mean a lot later. Measurements have shown that there's no knowing what might happen next.**

to think straight again. For the time being at least.

But right now, Vincent was fast asleep. He couldn't hear the clicking noises. He was lost in dreams about being a scientist or musician or sailing the world, or everything at once because he was destined to be something *very* special.

After a brief pause and two more bursts of pale pink flame, the crack reached the Parkers' overflowing letterbox and blew it off the house wall. The bills, reminders and catalogues all went up in flames. The Parkers would have loved it, if they'd noticed. But all of them, except for Vincent, were sitting in front of the telly absolutely mesmerised. They were watching an internet show called *Kiss the Frog and find a Prince?* and wouldn't have noticed a meteorite if it landed next to them. Mr and Mrs Parker - Wolfgang and Martha to their friends - and their daughter Marlene (also known as the "*cake-faced Photoshop-Monster*" when she and Vincent were fighting) shovelled crisps, marshmallows and jelly beans into their mouths. They screamed with laughter, close to choking, because they thought the candidates, dressed in frog costumes and swimming through a lake of white chocolate trying to dunk one another to get the highest score, were the *funniest* thing they'd ever seen.

Without anyone noticing, the crack made a zig-zag-line up the wall. When it reached the second floor, it suddenly changed direction - which is not physically possible. It went straight through the wall, down the other side, into Vincent's bedroom and entered his *fairly* ordinary life.

The clicking noise grew louder, the flames and flashes of light brighter. The crack skirted around Vincent's electric guitar and stopped in front of the telescope for a moment. Vincent had won it in a crossword competition despite the fact that he'd given a wrong answer (volcano ape – he had wondered about that one).

Vincent was taller than most of the children his age. His arms and legs were longer, his thoughts more complicated. That was why a teacher had written '*asks too many questions*' next to his name in the school central database. He'd received a serious telling-off from his parents for that. It's expensive to delete a comment in the [perfect-life database](#) so the Parkers decided to leave it there and buy a voice-controlled hair-dryer with a special function for blow-dry waves instead.

But as I said, Vincent was in the land of dreams, and the last thing on his mind was the 'pathetic note', as Uncle Cornelius had quite rightly called it.

**The huge database is designed to simplify peoples' lives, help them to predict their future and guide them through the forest of possibilities. But it didn't work for Vincent, because he usually didn't do whatever the software expected him to do and even the most intelligent computers had no idea what was to become of the boy.**

Vincent's arm hung out of bed. His right index finger touched the floor. There was a pencil with a chewed rubber top next to it. And more different-coloured pencils, all in need of sharpening, spread out across the floor.

Like a dog that had picked up a scent, the crack changed direction again, turning left and slowing down until it practically stopped moving. The flashes grew paler, the clicks far quieter. Hesitantly, almost respectfully, the crack approached a book with a linen binding covered in Star Wars stickers. Balls of fluff went up flames. Invisible fingers leafed through the pages of drawings. The light from a neon sign shone through the slits of the blinds, illuminating a sketch of green hills with a circle of wooden huts and sandy paths in the middle, and woods on the horizon which seemed to end in nothing. If you got right up close to the drawing, so close that the fine lines started to swim in front of your eyes, you could hear a thunderous noise growing louder and louder. Paper, houses and roads were being sucked into swirling whirlpools all over the page. Little black holes which led to oblivion.

'Obliterators,' a high-pitched voice squeaked. 'The boy can actually see them! That's new.'

More streaks of blue light flashed through the darkness. A corner of the book caught fire and went out again the same moment. Or I should say *sputtered* out, which sounds as bad as it looked.

'Drat!' The little voice could be heard swearing a bit more loudly. 'Darn it!'

The book closed without a sound. A blaze of light lit up the room and then leapt over the book like a flying figure of eight made of burning electrons, which looked pretty spectacular. Following that little party piece, which was a total waste of time because no one was watching anyway, the flame landed on the pencil, split it in two lengthwise (equally unnecessarily) and licked at Vincent's finger. His fingertip started to glow like molten glass above a fire. Vincent felt a small pain slowly spread through his whole body, which filled his dreams with sadness and dark foreboding. After a few seconds, the glow disappeared along with the pain. A wisp of smoke curled across the book.

There was the sound of a deep sigh. 'We'll meet again, my boy. I rather do think we'll meet again. If it's not too late, that is.'

The shifting shadow of a tiny man was cast against the book cover. 'But I won't be doing any more overtime. Not on my final mission. It's hopeless anyway.' The little man looked over to the telescope and shook his head. 'Broken, my foot!' Someone

didn't read the instructions properly. Tut, tut, why are humans always so impatient?' If you'd had a strong magnifying glass, or a not so strong electronic microscope, you'd have been able to see the shimmering outline of Ash Flux Underwood, an official top-degree super-courier.

It always took a moment for all the body parts to materialise and reassemble in the right place after a [dimension journey or quantum leap](#). It took eight seconds, which wasn't too bad considering Ash's lack of motivation, and then his round face appeared. His arms, legs, torso and skinny neck were already there, but his large backside was causing problems, as usual. A considerable part of it was still stuck in another dimension, giving the super-courier's behind the appearance of an apple with a bite taken out of it. Ash wasn't too happy about his job with all the lost cases and the leaden emptiness so he'd put on a bit of weight eating snacks to cheer himself up. But the rest of him wasn't in top shape either.

**When something goes wrong, you end up looking like what a human would call a monster or ogre (four arms und three heads, for example, or the other way round) and that's where all the myths, witch tales and horror stories come from.**

All the world, dimension and probability travel, the growing and shrinking, dispersing and reassembling, not to mention the laborious metamorphosis, had left some visible scars. It was hard to estimate how old Ash might be. On good days, he looked pretty good as couriers go; on bad days, he was uglier than a medium-sized toad after a round-trip in a particle accelerator. Despite the law, Ash had used the §3 improbability drive to get to his destination which was why all the electrical equipment within the radius of a mile was starting to play up.

The Parkers' mega-sized brand new ultra-broad screen TV and computer, or UbTaC, for short started to buzz and then said goodbye to family life with a dismal-sounding *plop*.

Wolfgang, Martha and Marlene were so flabbergasted that they all started to choke and spewed crumbs everywhere. Their eyes bulged like [lizards' eyes after a teleportation gone badly wrong](#). All was silent for a split second.

It was the most remarkable silence because it was as total as the silence in space at minus two-hundred and seventy degrees. It made the Parkers freeze, because unlike Vincent, the rest of his family couldn't cope with absolute silence. In fact, they actually felt threatened by it which really is silly. But most ordinary people are like that. They are frightened by things that don't actually exist.

[Everyone knows what teleporting is, of course: to travel from one place to another in an instant without moving. Despite all the precautions, lizards have been involved in a number of incidents where the soul arrives at the chosen destination several minutes after everything else. Not knowing where, or more importantly, what you are is at least as confusing for animals as it is for humans.](#)

No sooner had they overcome their first shock than the sirens sounded outside. Smoke detectors went off throughout the town, in their thousands. At the same moment the earth began to quake. Glasses, cups, and plates started humming like a [type B Observer](#) standing in the wind – or alpacas feeling homesick to use a terrestrial example. Vincent's elder sister Marlene let out a piercing scream. Stunned she pointed to the ceiling as the insignificant crack turned into a gap exactly eight point four cm wide with a loud creak and they could suddenly see Vincent's hand.

'What was that?' Martha asked, although she already knew the answer.

'What was that?', Wolfgang asked, although he knew the answer, too.

[Type B Observers differ to type A Observers in that they can regulate the operating temperature of their sunglasses, keeping it constant even in the extreme cold via the so-called shiver effect. The observers unfortunately freeze all the same and start to hum.](#)

'An earthquake,' Marlene said, putting an end to the silly rhetorical questions.

'Don't panic' Martha said.

'No need to panic *before* you panic,' Wolfgang said wagging his finger at her. 'That was a bit stronger than two weeks ago, but I don't think it was a record breaker. He wobbled his toes. I'd feel it in the soles of my feet.'

'Perhaps it was though,' Martha said staring intently at the screen hanging on the wall which had started flashing. A blinking red 8.2 appeared.

'Yeah!' Marlene yelled. She jumped up and high-fived her dad who had tears in his eyes. He was overcome with emotion and kept singing 'OH yes... yes, yes, yes, yes. OH yes, yes...' nodding to the beat of [the earthquake song](#).

One or two of you might be surprised by the Parkers' reaction, but this wasn't the first earthquake to rock their house. Nor the second or third, either. Since the dig started in High Valley, the earth quaked at least once a week. Cracks appeared all over town. They were like a spider's web spreading across squares, roads and buildings.

**[There are just two words in the earthquake song – oh and yes, and there's no proper tune so everyone can sing along.](#)**

The population of High Valley had grown used to the fact that the town centre was like a patchwork mat held together with tar and glue. They didn't grumble and gripe though. In fact the opposite was true. They would have been disappointed if things stayed quiet for too long. After each quake, the town council gave out shopping coupons and free samples of new washing powder, or organised street parties with mediocre cover bands, copious amounts of free beer, free wine, free Coke and free anything else. You wouldn't hear people in High Valley talking about the weather like ordinary people, instead they gossiped about what gifts to expect after the next earthquake. Most of the selfies sent from High Valley showed people looking delighted alongside cracked toilet bowls, sinks, porcelain statues or false teeth. But tonight's earthquake was stronger than anything that had happened before and the Parkers were beginning to realise that they would probably have to move out.

'What about Vincent?' Wolfgang Parker stood up. He pressed a red button beside the sofa and watched as metal stays came up out of the floor and clamped themselves between the ground and the ceiling.

‘Can you see anything, Marlene?’ her mother asked, frantically blowing on her freshly painted toenails. What do you see? She bent down and took off her electric toe spreader.

Marlene took a selfie of herself with the crack in the ceiling and pressed SEND. ‘Vincent is fine,’ she said. He’s fast asleep. He’s going to end up snoring through half of his life.

‘Is his skin ok?’

‘It looks fine from here. No glow. Nothing.’ There was a loud cracking sound and Marlene jumped. ‘Should we... should we go outside, do you think? The crack is pretty big, after all.’

‘The house is fine,’ Wolfgang Parker said sounding unimpressed. ‘We’ve got that in writing. The metal stays and the concrete can withstand 100 tons. He knocked one of the stays. ‘Solid as a rock.’

‘Are you sure there’s no sign of any glowing on his fingers?’ Martha asked again as she admired her neon-yellow toe nails and pushed herself up out of her chair. ‘These quakes cause so many electromagnetic waves. Dearie me. Poor old Vincent. This allergy will be the death of him. It’s high time Cornelius finds a cure.’

‘No Mum,’ Marlene snorted, ‘*Vincent* is perfectly fine.’

One by one the smoke and burglar alarms fell silent. So did the fridge monitor, the car alarm and popcorn popping in the microwave. The biggest siren of all, on the roof of the High Valley council hall sent a last howl out into the darkness. Then everything was quiet again. But not totally quiet. Not like just now. The guttural croak made by the animated frogs in the garden was so loud you might think someone had been fooling around with the controls.

Marlene stared at her mobile phone crossly. It was showing an error message. ‘If the internet doesn’t start working again soon I’m going to go mad,’ she said. ‘That picture is bound to get 1000 clicks. The crack looks so awesome.’ She looked across at the TV. The screen was black.

Wolfgang and Martha suddenly looked startled when the multifunction watches they were both wearing went off the next minute. Their pulse rates were shown leaping up to 180 then down to seventy before hitting zero when the watches turned themselves off. Stunned, they both held their breath until they realised that their hearts hadn’t actually stopped beating just because the watches had stopped.

'Vincent!' Wolfgang Parker called up to the crack in the ceiling. 'Is everything all right up there?'

No answer. Vincent lay there as if he were frozen solid. He had spent all day in the woods before coming home and falling asleep over his sketch books when he went to bed straight after dinner.

In his dreams, he was running. A horde of pursuers were right on his heels. He slid down a steep hill, leapt over a fallen tree and crouched down. They mustn't find him. He had to get there on time. Otherwise everything would be lost. *Everything!*

'You have to make it,' he heard the unfamiliar voice of a girl whisper. Then there was a rushing sound in his ears and a more familiar voice forced its way into his consciousness.

It was his dad.

The dream faded away.

'Vincent!' Wolfgang picked up the electric backscratcher from the table. 'Wake up!' He pushed the rod through the ceiling but was disappointed when the clasp mechanism wouldn't switch on. 'It all looks fine from here. He just won't wake up.'

'He gets that from you,' Martha said as the cellar door swung open.

Riley, the freshly shorn – or to call a spade a spade – totally *mutilated*, king-sized Poodle came into the living room.

Wolfgang shook his head. 'Has that good-for-nothing dog finally realised that the house is wobbling. Go and fetch Vincent. Wake him up! Go on!'

Riley gave Wolfgang, Martha and Marlene each a confused look before he lifted his snout and trotted up the stairs. He tried to wake up Vincent up by licking right across his face with his wet tongue as usual. Vincent didn't react. He didn't make a sound, which meant that his four-legged friend repeated his disgusting ritual a second time. This time with more drool.

At last Vincent opened his eyes.

'Come on down,' Marlene croaked through the crack. 'There's been another earthquake. We are about to hear what gifts we are going to get this time.'

'What?' Vincent asked still half asleep. He felt as if he had been knocked out.

His legs hurt; his pyjamas were soaked in sweat. An unpleasant throb was beginning behind his forehead. Harsh strips of light flashed through the slits in the blind. Still half asleep, Vincent stared at the new gap in the floor. It was much wider than the rest of the cracks in the house. Maybe they'd allow him to sleep in the garden hut until the workmen had repaired the damage. That's where he slept best.

Vincent got up and let the blinds snap open. The giant advertisement sign on the drilling rig was flashing like mad. Vincent put on his desk lamp and jumped. A burning pain shot right through his finger and a cold shiver ran down his spine. 'Oh no,' he sighed when he saw the elongated blister on the tip of his finger. It was filled with water 'Not again,' He hadn't even watched TV before going to sleep. And he'd turned off his phone after exactly thirty minutes. Was that too much now? Had his allergy got worse? He didn't want to even think about it. Perhaps the blister came from practising the guitar? Could that be? Cornelius had told him he would get calluses at the tips of his fingers if he practised a lot. And he'd been doing just that the last few days. Playing for hours on end. *So it's not surprising if you've got blistered fingers*, Vincent tried to settle his mind.

'Get dressed and come on down,' his dad shouted up through the gap in the floor. 'They might end up evacuating us this time. They did say that was possible.'

Vincent nodded silently. The idea that he might have to change schools made him feel sick. Everything would start all over again. He'd have to keep explaining how screens caused his allergic reaction and why he had to use old school books to study instead of the Internet like everyone else. He hated this special treatment. He hated the pitying looks, the questions and the teasing.

Suddenly the floor beneath Vincent's feet started to vibrate. Riley barked right up and down the scales before hiding behind Vincent's legs. He was the most cowardly dog Vincent had ever met, but he loved him just the same.

Vincent's dad looked through the gap again. 'Hurry up. The Internet is off. I think it's serious this time.'

'I know,' Vincent said crossly. 'Cornelius told us this would happen. He calculated that the drilling would make the waves worse.'

'Ah yes... the waves.' Wolfgang sneered. Of course my wonderful brother predicted this. The *great* scientist, master of time and space, is working on his latest end of the world theory.

Martha Parker pushed herself into the picture. 'Are you sure everything is ok?' She stood on the sofa. 'Are your hands ok? Let me see.'

Reluctantly Vincent crouched down. Why did he have to be the one with a screen allergy? Hay fever, lactose, – that's what normal people were allergic to. But no, he reacted to radiation! If his mother saw the blister he'd be off to A&E at once. There were always more doctors who wanted to do all sorts of tests but they always ended up shrugging and prescribing some weird medicine or strange therapy. That was the last thing he needed right now.

'Here you go?' Vincent said, smiling and hiding his blistered finger behind his thumb.

'If you hold your hands like that, I can't see a thing, '

'But...'

'Show me your fingers this minute!'

He knew his mother would never leave off, so he was going to have to use plan B instead. He signaled to Riley behind his back and then he started to turn over his hands in slow motion. But before his mother could take a look at his damaged finger, Riley poked his nose through the gap and gave one loud bark.

Martha nearly fell off her chair. 'For goodness sake, Vincent! Shut that dog up and get downstairs!'

Vincent took a deep breath. 'I'll be there in a minute.'

Outside you could hear fire engines coming closer.

Vincent lifted his sketch book up off the floor. And turned to the last drawing he'd done. He stared at the singed paper in disbelief. Could an earthquake actually set paper on fire? Normal paper didn't start burning at less than 200 degrees. Vincent looked around and noticed a second crack on the floor a mere centimetre wide. This crack had made its way from the broken windowsill down into his room and then done a detour round his guitar. He'd never seen a crack like it! The edges were burnt black, as if someone had used a blowtorch to cut through the concrete and metal. If you looked closely, you could see a fine zig-zag line. He had to tell Cornelius. There must be some kind of scientific explanation. Maybe it was made by the waves his uncle kept talking about. 'They can destroy anything if they have the right frequency. Humans aren't safe. If the worst comes to the worst they'll just vanish into thin air.'

Vincent sat down on the edge of his bed. And stared at the sketch book. An odd smell wafted from the singed paper as he looked at it more closely. The paper smelt

of peanut flips! Peanut flips which he was never allowed to eat because they made his sister break out in spots.

The doorbell rang. At practically the same moment, a loud bang made the window panes rattle and Vincent's bedroom went dark. Astonished, Vincent turned around and stared out of the window. Riley started whining and pressed himself against Vincent's legs. A glittering cloud of dust rose up into the orange night sky above the drilling rig. The huge sign had crashed to the ground.