



ALEX
SCOTT **The**
Tether

A Short Story

THE TETHER

By Alex Scott

Nick gazed out the window of Gemini Deck on the Big Lift, searching for the tether that attached it to Earth. Clouds swirled over the ocean, where the coastline emerged as a gentle brush stroke. But the Earth was too bright, and the tether too thin, for him to see it. He could only trust that it was still there.

Just a week before, Nick was at home on the Florida panhandle. He had flown to the Lift only yesterday. Now he was floating in an indoor garden inside an elevator above the atmosphere, halfway to the Jefferson space colony. Flowers and bushes were sticking out of the wall. He ached from the airplane seats, the drawer he'd slept in, the padded walls he'd hit while floating. He still wasn't used to the weightlessness. The bars mounted on and between the walls were the only way to move or stop.

He had dreamed of riding the Lift his whole life, yet he hadn't expected it to be so lonely. His parents had arranged the trip as a once-in-a-lifetime birthday present. Unfortunately, they could afford only two

tickets, one each for him and his mother. And it wasn't the same without Dad or Perry. If they were here, they'd have the time of their lives. They could play games in Turbo Deck, check out the exhibit on Crystal Deck, or just goof around in zero gravity throughout the Lift. It could have been a blast.

Nick finished the cereal bar he'd bought at the cafeteria on Galaxy Deck, and breathed in the scent of the flowers that filled Gemini.

A boy about his age floated up next to him. He wore baggy clothes and had hair that flared out everywhere. He pointed out the window. "I can see my house from here."

Nick smirked. "Very funny. I'm Nick, what's your name?"

The boy turned, and bugged his eyes out. "Nick? No way, it's really you. It's me, Michael. I can't believe you're here."

Nick took a second look. "Michael? Michael Shand? My god, it's been forever! What are you doing here? I mean, here, of all places!"

Michael glanced out the window.

"I'm going up to see my dad. He lives up on Jefferson now."

"Who'd have thought he'd end up there?" Nick let himself hang off the wall. "My cousins live up there, too. Haven't seen them in two years, but my mom's taking me up for my birthday."

"Dude, happy birthday. Should've got you something."

"Because of course you knew I'd be here," Nick said. "What about your mom?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "She still hates his guts. I'm lucky I made it this far."

Nick remembered their divorce, and cringed. The Shands would fight any time, any place, no matter who was watching. It was a wonder they never killed each other.

"At least you still get to see him," Nick said. "How've things been since you moved?"

"Not too bad. I have a stepbrother now. His dad's an airline pilot, married my mom last year."

"Can't wait to meet them. Wanna hang out?"

"Sounds good." Michael glanced at the wrapper in Nick's hand. "Where'd you get that? I'm starving."

"Oh, it's Galaxy Deck, right under us. I'll show you." Nick tugged on the handle and launching himself downward, then grabbed another one beside the corridor to Galaxy Deck.

Michael caught up, and they went through.

A window spread across the opposite wall, displaying a glowing panorama of Earth. There were tables and chairs on both floor and ceiling. The sight still made Nick a little dizzy. He navigated slowly to the vending machine using the bars that crossed the room.

Michael floated behind, twisting around with no way to stop. Nick waited, grabbed Michael's collar, and straightened him up. Michael laughed. "Still not used to this." He looked at the selection on the screen, and ordered a cinnamon roll. "Hey, Nick, got any money?"

"You didn't bring any?"

"I'm out of cash, and I left my card in the room. What about you, when did you get so greedy?"

"I didn't—you can use mine, okay?" Nick dug his card out of his wallet and swiped it. The machine fed the roll through the slot.

Michael slapped Nick on the shoulder. "Come on, you know I'm messing with you, right?" He took the roll. "But thanks, man. I mean it."

They snagged a table, and strapped themselves into the chairs.

Nick heard his mom's voice. She was waving at him from a corridor on the side, coming in from Bright Deck. She pulled herself out, pushed herself off the poles, and flew toward the

table. Michael snorted with laughter as she dogpaddled through the air. Nick had tried to tell her weightlessness didn't work that way.

She stopped on a pole, straightened herself out, and adjusted her hair. "Lord, this zero gravity—it's a miracle I haven't broken something yet."

"Good morning to you, too," Nick said.

"Who's your friend?"

"It's Michael. You remember Michael Shand, right?"

Michael waved. "How's it going, Mrs. Tallier?"

Her eyes flickered. "Of course I remember! Look at you, you used to be so tiny. Your mother must have such a handful. How is she, anyway?"

"Doing okay. Got married."

"That's the first I've heard of it. Are they around?"

Michael glanced at the corridor. "I think they're still in bed. We had a long trip."

"So did we," Nick's mom said. "I hope I see them later. Nick, can you get me some Pop Tarts, and some orange juice?"

"Fine." Nick didn't feel like fighting it. She gave him five dollars, then he unbuckled and went back to the vending machine.

When he returned, she was, naturally, talking about him. "Oh, Nick cried all day after you left. I could hardly do anything."

"Here you go, Mom," Nick groaned, and passed along her breakfast.

"Don't be so embarrassed. It's true, isn't it?" She opened the Pop Tart packet as the bottle twirled in front of her.

Michael grinned. "Don't cry for me, Nicky. I'm just fine."

"Shut up," Nick said.

"So what are you up to today?" his mother said.

"We were just about to leave. Right, Michael?"

"Sure," Michael said. "Let's check out the arcade."

"Got your phone?" Nick's mom said.

"Right here." Nick tapped his pocket.

His mom grabbed the bottle and popped the cap. "Have fun."

Michael was still grinning when he and Nick reached Gemini. "She hasn't changed a bit."

"What about you?" Nick said. "When was the last time you saw your dad?"

They turned toward the Spark Deck corridor. Michael counted on his fingers. "About five years ago."

"Five years?" Nick turned, and kept turning, and spun through the corridor, into the fitness room on Spark Deck. Treadmills, ellipticals, and rowing machines whirled around him, and he had no idea which way was what.

Michael snatched him, pulled him to the wall, and grabbed a handle.

“You okay?”

“No.” Nick felt his breakfast climb up his throat.

Michael hopped from handle to handle, holding Nick behind him like a banner.

When they reached Turbo Deck, Nick wrapped himself around a pole to breathe and let his breakfast settle. Michael drifted around to explore. Every wall was divided into cells, each with a different game, and Michael peered into each one. Nick felt better by the time Michael came back and took Nick to an empty cell with an augmented reality ping-pong table. Nick swiped his card, and a slot opened in the wall. He took out the paddles and goggles, and passed a set to Michael.

Before they could start, Nick’s phone rang. He drew to a corner. “Hey, Mom. What’s up?”

“Nick, is Michael still with you?”

“Yeah, he’s right here. Why?”

“I just called his mother. She never changed her number, so I thought I’d say hi. Do you know where she is?”

“Spark Deck?”

“Oklahoma. She says Michael ran away a week ago, hasn’t seen him since. I’ve never heard anybody so frantic.”

Nick stared at Michael, noticed his nervous tapping on his paddle, his eyes darting all around. Was this really the same kid who would spend days with Nick playing on the beach,

or whole nights gazing up at the stars? The same one who would let Nick come over any time to play games just like this? Was he really someone who would run off into outer space on his own?

Michael’s eyes caught Nick’s. “Sometime this century,” he said.

“What should I do?” Nick whispered into the phone.

He heard his mother sigh. “Listen, he might be a stowaway. I hate to ask you to do this, but can you bring him down here? He needs to tell her he’s safe, and we need to keep him out of trouble.”

“Sure, I’ll be there soon.” Nick closed the call.

“Got you on a tight leash, huh?” Michael put on his goggles.

“Sure.” Nick wondered what to say, whether Michael would come along or do something drastic, and what would drive Michael to try and do this. He’d mentioned his father..

Michael watched him with an impatient scowl.

“Sorry,” Nick said, putting on his goggles. “Let’s play.” He clicked a button on the paddle that made a small white ball and a score counter appear over the table. He served.

And he could not focus. His worry yanked on his arms, pulled his eyes away, froze him. He kept thinking about Michael’s mother and his father and the colony and what it must have

taken to get here, and it distracted Nick from some easy shots. Michael pounded him in a few minutes.

“You sure you’re okay?” Michael said.

“Wanna play something else?”

“Sure.” Nick followed Michael, full of questions, but unable to let them out.

Along the way, Nick got another phone call. “Hello?”

“Nick, are you coming down here or not? Mrs. Shand’s desperate.”

“Uh, sure. Just a minute.” He closed the call.

“What does she want now?” Michael said.

Nick sighed. His heart was a balloon ready to pop. “Michael, I.. well...”

“Come on, spit it out.”

“Look, my mom called your mom. We need you to come down and talk to her.”

Michael’s eyes spread open.

“We know you ran away. It’s okay, really. You oughta be able to stay with us until we get to the colony.”

Michael began looking around the deck.

He kicked himself off the cell wall, then caught a pole and swerved to the corridor into Spark Deck, all before Nick could react.

Nick felt numb. Before that first phonecall, he had hoped he could hang out with Michael the rest of the trip, even on the colony. They didn’t

have to be alone, cut off from everyone they knew. It would have been fun. Now all that seemed to have been chucked into orbit.

What if Michael was a stowaway? What if he got caught? Would he ever reach his father? Would Nick ever see him again?

Taking in a breath of resolve, he jumped out, reaching for the same pole. His fingers slipped, and he had to drift across the deck before he could grab another one. When he did, he clutched it tight and tried to breathe. What now?

First off, he thought, call Mom.

He dialed her up, biting his lip, dreading the way her voice would stab him in the ear when he told.

She answered.

“Bad news,” he said. “I tried to talk to him, and he ran off.”

“Ran off? Where is he?”

“If I knew I’d tell you.” He looked toward the Spark Deck corridor, wondering how far Michael could have gone. “Let me look for him, okay?”

His mom groaned. “Call me when you find him. I’m still in the cafeteria.”

“Sure thing.” He hung up, turned himself around, and aimed for the corridor. After taking a few deep breaths, he kicked himself off, and flew straight through.

Spark Deck made him just as dizzy as before, as left and right refused to stop moving. He caught a treadmill to

stop himself; the girl running on it goggled at him, and he gave her an awkward grin before he pushed back to the wall, where he caught a bar. From there, he climbed along the wall, keeping his head down.

When he reached the next corridor, he risked a look through the whole deck. He had to turn away after only a few seconds; but he could tell Michael was not there.

He wasn't in Gemini, either. Nick went to the same window where they had met up, and scanned every tree and flower bed. Other than the cafeteria and the bedrooms, that left Crystal Deck, above him.

It was a gallery on the history of space travel, depicted in statues, dioramas, and holograms. In the center was a glass column, with a miniature of the Big Lift crawling from one end to the other. It was tiny, and had come a long way on a very long thread.

Nick spotted Michael up in the corner, staring out a window toward the Earth. His throat tightened as he approached. "Michael," he said.

Michael turned, and only now did Nick notice the bags under his eyes.

"It's okay," Nick said. "What's going on?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"I might have a few ideas. How'd you even get here on your own?"

"A fake ID, a credit card, and so

much planning," Michael said. "I have a cabin, but as far as the crew knows, I'm a nineteen-year-old named Gary." He gazed out the window. "I'm sorry I ran off. As soon as you mentioned my mom, I panicked."

"What's going on?"

Michael groaned, rubbed his face. "Well, first she married that pilot, who hates me, and got me that stepbrother, who hates me even more. Then I found—" He balled his fists and shook. "I found my dad's letters. Turned out he'd been writing to me for years. They were all stashed in the attic."

"And nobody ever told you?"

"No. I mean, he was never the best dad, but... he was still my dad. And I miss him."

Nick thought about his dad back home, how empty this trip had felt without him. "Why don't you stick with us? I'm sure my mom can help."

"Sure, until we get to the colony. Then you'll have to send me straight home, 'cause if you don't, my mom would make sure you regret it. Especially if it means I get to see Dad. She'll probably have you two charged with kidnapping, or something. You know what my mom's like. She once called the cops on a neighbor's barbecue because she didn't like the music."

Nick pictured Mrs. Shand breathing fire over this, and cringed. What was he supposed to do?

His phone rang. "Mom?"

"Nick, please tell me you found him."

He took a long look at Michael. They had barely spent an hour together, and already it seemed as distant as their childhood. Nick felt as though no matter what, he would lose his best friend all over again.

At the same time, Michael deserved to see his father.

"Sorry," Nick said. "Can't find him. Must have gotten away."

Michael perked his head.

Nick's mother groaned. "Mrs. Shand's going to be furious."

"I don't know what to tell you. Just slippery, I guess."

He heard his mother sigh. "Can you come back down here?"

"Sure. Be there in a minute."

She said goodbye, and they hung up.

"Holy crap," Michael said.

"I know. I can't believe I did it, either." Nick wiped sweat off his forehead. "Think you'll be safe till we get there?"

"I can lie low in my room. Maybe we'll run into each other on the colony."

"I'll keep an eye out," Nick said. "But just in case we don't, good luck."

"Thanks a lot, man." Michael gave him one final hug. "I dunno what I'd do without you." Michael flew off toward Turbo Deck, and turned and waved on the way out. Nick waved back, and went through Gemini to Galaxy Deck.

His mother was hanging up her phone when he arrived. "Mrs. Shand again. She won't stop calling." She sighed. "What am I supposed to tell her?"

Nick shrugged. "I looked everywhere."

His mother stared at him for a moment, and a shiver crept up his spine. Had she figured him out?

She let out a heavy groan. "Come here." When he did, she wrapped her arms around him. "Nick, I love you, and your father loves you, and Perry loves you, and I wish more than anything that we could all be together right now."

"I love you, too," Nick said.

She let him go, and he strapped himself into a seat. "I think he'll be okay. He made it this far."

His mother gave him that stare again. "But why would he do it?"

He felt that shiver again. "Well, he did mention something about his dad being up there."

The stare in his mom's eyes changed, as if no longer aimed at him, as if somehow, she were staring at Mrs. Shand. "She never mentioned that." She leaned back. "We should look his father up when we get there, make sure he knows what's going on."

"Maybe so."

His mother stretched her arms. "God, the stress. You want to go look around the Lift?"

“Sure,” Nick said, hoping Michael was out of sight.

His mother unbuckled herself, and let herself float out of her seat. Her head turned toward the window.

“Look, you can see the tether.”

Nick looked. “I see it.”

It was like a hair, barely glinting over the surface of the Earth, a clear line, pointing the way back home.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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