

THE HOPE GAMES

(by Robert Bee)

“A sports carnival?” James Speechly, the mayor of the city spluttered.

Peter Roberts met the mayor’s eye without flinching. “You asked for a diversion, something to take people’s minds off the threat. What better way than sport? You know that after sex, sport occupies the average mind more than any other activity. Ergo, a sports carnival. Not just a carnival, but...”

Speechly leaned forward, despite his doubts. “But...?”

“...a full blown games, with a capital G,” he said. “The Games,” he repeated with a dramatic flourish, emphasising ‘the’.

Speechly regarded his Interior Minister sceptically. “Peter, you are kidding me, aren’t you? Putting aside the threat which we all agree is very real, how on earth could we hold a sports carnival... sorry, games? Have you forgotten a few realities? Have you forgotten where we are? How, for mercy sake, would we compete? This is not Sydney or Beijing. Sunny skies and balmy weather, warm waters and green grasses. And there’s the matter of gravity.” He stared a challenge at Roberts.

Peter Roberts turned to gaze out the office window, past the plaza and its strolling occupants, out through the triple armoured glass of the city dome and surveyed the grey cratered landscape and the sparkling stars above the horizon. “No, I haven’t forgotten,” he said. “I’ve taken it all into account and that is why...” Roberts turned back to his mayor. “I am confident these will be a games to remember. The inaugural... and possibly last... Lunar Games.”

“Current projection?” Dr Greg Neely, Lunar City’s Chief Scientist asked the shift astronomer.

Alan Plummer rubbed his red sleepless eyes. “Probability of impact has risen to ninety seven percent,” he said. “Time to impact is now thirty seven days, give or take an hour.”

“Ninety seven percent. But that means there is a three percent chance it will miss, doesn’t it?” Neely asked.

Plummer shook his head sadly. “Sorry Pollyanna, but it was a five percent chance of miss a week ago. It’s progressively getting more certain of a hit.” He watched Dr Neely’s shoulders sag. “Sorry doc, but them’s the numbers.”

Dr Neely simply nodded. “What’s this comet’s name again?”

“It’s named after its discoverer Steve Hope, from Siding Springs, Australia” Plummer replied.

“Comet Hope,” Neely said. “That’s irony for you.” He shrugged. “I’d better report this to the Mayor.”

“Thanks Greg.” Mayor Speechly hung up the phone and turned back to his Transport Minister, his eyes as hard as steel. “Now Reg, tell me again why we can’t get evacuation inside thirty seven days.”

“You are serious, aren’t you,” Dianne Fisher asked her boss.

“I’ve never been more serious,” Peter said. “Every person here on the Moon is staring at oblivion in less than thirty seven days. We have no hope of evacuation in that time and nowhere to hide. If it hits, the entire Moon is kaput. So what to do to maintain public moral? We take a tip from the Romans.”

”What, pizzas and cappuccinos?” Dianne quipped.

“No, bread and circuses,” Peter said. “For lack of gladiators, we’ll have a sports carnival. Lunar Games.”

“But how? There’s no room in the dome, and no air outside, not to mention the gravity.”

“My god,” Peter snapped. “Everyone’s fixated on the gravity.”

“It is only one sixth that on Earth,” Dianne reminded him.

“So? Things get thrown further and people jump higher. That sounds pretty exciting to me. Think of the javelin and discus throws and the high jumps, not to mention the pole vaults.” Peter smiled suddenly. “Damn, I might even enter that event myself.”

“While you’re in a clumsy space suit? Peter, get real,” Dianne sighed.

“Look Dianne, in the original games, they were starkers. These days they wear shorts, tea shirts, track suits and skin suits. We’ll just take it a step further.”

Dianne sat back and stared at her boss, then shook her head and laughed. “Like I first said, you are serious.”

“Very serious,” Peter said. “Look, let’s get down to details. The throwing events will have to be outside the dome, as you could possibly throw a javelin six time the normal seventy metres. Also the running events and long jump. We could use that level area just outside the dome, its nice and stable.” Peter started to warm to the subject.

“What about the jumping?” Dianne asked, starting to catch Peter’s enthusiasm.

“Inside the dome, in the plaza. Even if a highest pole vault reaches twenty metres, that’s well below the dome’s ceiling, and I... that is they... won’t be hindered by a spacesuit.” Peter clapped his hands. “Right, get that all written down for me please, and work out all the logistical details. Then we’ll make the big announcement to the populace.” He turned to leave, then quickly turned back. “Oh, and Dianne, see if you can locate some gold and silver to make the medals.”

Despite the dazzling sickle of Comet Hope’s tail dominating the Lunar City’s sky, its fuzzy head growing larger and brighter each day, enthusiasm for the Lunar Games was at a peak on the third games day. Every occupant of the dome wore a T-shirt proudly saying “WHILE THERE’S HOPE THERE’S LIFE” and most participated in at least one event. Peter was never more proud of his fellow citizens.

The final event of the Games, contrary to Olympic tradition, was the pole vault, using a slightly longer pole than normal. Thankfully there had been no injuries, so far, from the near twenty metre falls from the bar, thanks to the gentle gravity and ground mattresses.

Peter Roberts gripped the pole and readied himself for his final vault. It was to be the final vault of the games, successful or otherwise. He heard a murmur start to sweep through the spectators and he followed their stares upwards. Comet Hope blazed like a Sun above them, closer than it had ever been. Surely the time had come, Peter thought. Destiny.

He caught Dianne’s eyes in the crowd, smiled, blew her a kiss, then gripped the pole and ran as fast as the weak gravity would allow. Digging the pole into the slot, he leaped and soared upwards, rolling onto his back as he cleared the bar. At that frozen moment, before gravity started its downward tug, he stared up at the comet and watched it speed silently past, seeming to graze the tip of the nearby mountain, then disappear over the horizon, dragging its nebulous tail after it. His was a gold medal winning jump but Peter knew that the sudden outburst of rapturous cheering wasn’t for him.

He didn’t mind in the least.