



Westerhear

A SCI-FI SIZZLER

Craig A. Falconer

YESTER YEAR

CRAIG A. FALCONER

Yester Year

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Reader's note: *Yester Year* was written, edited and produced in Scotland. As such, some spellings will differ from those found in the United States. Examples of British English include using colour rather than color, organise rather than organize, and centre rather than center. An exception to this rule is the use of proper nouns, which retain their American spelling where applicable.

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Contents

[Books by Craig A. Falconer](#)

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[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[Too Good To Be True](#)

Author's Notes

Books by Craig A. Falconer

Not Alone: First Encounter (Prequel)

Not Alone

Not Alone: Second Contact

Not Alone: The Final Call

~ *Contact Trilogy box set* ~

Not Alone: Fractured Union

Not Alone: Leap of Destiny

Not Alone: Revelations

~ *Discovery Trilogy box set* ~

Not Alone: The Awakening

Not Alone: Hidden Wonder

Not Alone: Endgame

Not Alone: Origins

Terradox

The Fall of Terradox

Terradox Reborn

Terradox Beyond

~ *Terradox Quadrilogy box set* ~

Funscreen

Sycamore

Sycamore 2

Sycamore X

Sycamore XL

~ *Cyber Seed Quadrilogy box set* ~

Sci-Fi Sizzlers:

Wanderlust

Pamela 2.0

Sunset Stays

Pumpkin Splice

Happy, Inc.

When Santa Slays

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Yester Year

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If there's a prize for *Sister of the Year*, I think I have it in the bag.

Paula Frederick, it'll say. *Sister of the Year*.

We haven't even boarded the Bullet Sub yet, but my little brother Rob is already giddy for everything that lies ahead.

He's never been to Dream Rock, the world's grandest leisure destination, and with the prices they charge for admission I think he probably never thought he'd have the chance.

The Dream Rock amusement park covers the entirety of what we used to call Brown Island. Back in the day it was a prison colony and then it kind of went to ruin.

It's pretty cool that it's only a few hours from our house, and judging by all the foreign languages filling the air around us I'd say it's pretty obvious that most people are coming from a *lot* further away.

So how come *I* can afford two tickets to Dream Rock... let alone the X-VIP tickets we have today? Well, I can't. But I hit the lottery with a weekend internship working on robotics in the island's Yester Year zone, and last week I just so happened to win one award that does exist: *Employee of the Month*.

Some of the others weren't too happy that an intern could win it, but I *did* come up with a solution to a problem with one of the robot horses that

was threatening to derail a big part of the *Show For The Ages* spectacular that happens every night at 7pm.

I've already been offered a full-time job but I still have two years left of college, so I'm not going to take it. Not yet.

Every Saturday and Sunday morning, I drive to the coast and board the underwater train for Dream Rock. Until today I've always taken the regular train. You see, the Bullet Sub doesn't start running until the park opens — and that's no use for getting me there in time to start my shift.

Today, though, I'm not working.

Today, I can finally ride the Bullet Sub.

It doesn't matter that buying a seat on this amazing ride costs almost as much as a regular ticket to the whole park, because a free ride is another one of the perks of being an *Xtra*-VIP.

I can hardly believe how big the line is given how much it costs, but I guess if people are going to travel halfway around the world to get here they think it's worth splashing out for the full experience.

Both of the trains travel through tunnels. That sounds obvious, but some people seem to think the bullet train is actually *in* the water. I guess that's partly down to some genius marketing, which is a common theme at Dream Rock, but some of it is down to just how great the engineering is.

That's another common theme, for sure, because I don't think it's any exaggeration to say that a lot of what goes on at Dream Rock represents the absolute peak of human achievement in engineering as well as robotics.

There's a very strict no-photography policy on the Bullet Sub so even I don't know exactly what we're going to experience. Rob is talking my ear off with *his* ideas, which mostly come from blogs and online review sites. I've been told by management that the experience is slightly different every time though, so he's in for some surprises.

And besides, the thrill of a ride is in the riding. A roller coaster is fun even when you can see the loops coming, and we can't even see what's ahead of us.

All I know for sure is that the Bullet Sub travels through a glass tunnel, kind of like the shark tunnels we all know from aquariums, whereas the standard train goes through a run of the mill concrete tunnel.

A cynic might think there's going to be some virtual reality trickery coming our way, and that we might be in a concrete tunnel after all. Those same cynics think the same about the *Show For The Ages*, though, and I know for a fact our robots are real.

One of the core principles of Dream Rock is that everything you see is real. Everything you see is really there. We have actors, we have robots, we have architecture and set design that would blow most Hollywood blockbusters out of the water.

What we don't have are *any* special effects or VR experiences. Not-a-one.

Knowing this makes me excited to see just what the engineers have managed to pull off down here. I guess thinking about that instead of just looking forward to a cool ride might make me a nerd, but I also guess you might have picked that up from this whole '*being a third-year robotics student who brought her 12-year-old brother as her plus-one*' thing.

But hey, I'm here: getting ready to board the most expensive amusement ride in the world with a happy kid who's looking at me like I hung the moon.

So yeah... maybe sometimes the nerd wins.

"Scared yet?" Rob asks as we're called forward from the front of the line.

I laugh. "Not yet."

We walk down some steps with another few dozen people, then take our seats in a narrow cylindrical train. I say "train" because that's what they call it — not because anything about this actually evokes a railway carriage. The walls are black, which I definitely didn't expect, and the harsh overhead lighting makes me think of a dentist's office.

Once we're all sitting down on the bench-style rows of eight seats, our individual restraints come forward over our shoulders and click into place.

They're the kind of restraints you get on a roller coaster that either goes upside down or really really fast, as opposed to the more basic stomach-bar restraints you get on gentler rides.

For a simple ride that goes in a straight line, this seems like it could be overkill. But we *are* at Dream Rock, so I should know better than to think there aren't some surprises in store.

There are two safety attendants on board, both dressed as old-timey train conductors. Every worker at Dream Rock wears a full uniform to add to the immersive visitor experience. Since I work with the robots in Yester Year, *I* have to dress in an outfit, too.

I'm not too hot on it, since it makes me look like something between a wench from a tavern in a fantasy TV show and a spinster who really needs to sew herself a clean dress, but it is what it is. If that's the price of getting to tinker with the best robots in the world and build up my resumé in the best way possible, I'm all for it.

Rob is dressed up in his own Yester Year garb already, which in his case is an off-the-shelf costume my dad bought online from a company that runs Renaissance Fairs.

He asked me if I would wear mine, and he asked in that earnest kind of childlike way that makes embarrassment an insufficient reason to say no. I'm not wearing it yet, at least, but I'm going to pick it up from my locker just before the big show at 7pm.

That show takes place in Yester Year, which is the last zone we're visiting, so I'm glad it's working out like that. Wearing my shabby wench outfit in the Tech World and Beach Blowout zones would have been too much, I think, even though Rob has no such concern.

He's way past old enough to be self-aware, but he still doesn't seem to care what other people think. That's one thing we could all learn from kids, I suppose.

The conductors firmly reiterate the no-photography rule and tell us to get ready for the ride of our lives.

At the touch of a button, the Bullet Sub slowly and silently moves forward. And as soon as it does, the silence dies.

I don't know what I hear first — my gasp, or everyone else's.

The walls of the train were never black at all, the walls of the bay at the *station* were black. Our walls are the most perfectly clear glass I've ever seen, and when I say perfectly clear I truly mean it.

The ocean is literally all around us. If I reached up I would be able to touch the glass ceiling and it's so clear that I feel like I could touch the fish swirling overhead. I have no idea how thick the glass is but I'm genuinely awestruck by just how *clear* it is.

We're still barely moving, and as I look around I see that the crystal clear views owe a lot to the excellent lighting on the sea floor.

For all the world it feels like we're *in* the water, in some kind of bubble. We are, in effect — a bubble of scientific genius and engineering marvel — but it all just feels so... real. Immediate. Immersive.

Immersive is the word for everything at Dream Rock, but nowhere more than here.

As the seconds tick by and we pick up some speed, it gets clearer and clearer that the promise of the ride of our lives was no exaggeration. A huge shark begins stalking us, and then rams into the glass.

I can't pretend I'm not shocked by the force of the impact and how much it shakes us, even though I know it's a robot.

Rob squeezes my hand, scared for the first time, and he asks me if this is part of the show. I think about saying no, to make it even more fun for him, but he's scared enough that I reassure him instead.

But when the colossal robotic shark headbutts us again, *that's* when I start having second thoughts.

Because *that's* when the water starts dripping in.

“Please remain seated,” a conductor says, as though we could get out of these restraints even if we wanted to.

I look around. People are frightened — like *really* frightened. There are no other kids that I can see. Twelve was the minimum age so Rob just sneaked over the line, and I’m starting to wish he hadn’t.

“We’re going to hurry to the arrival dock,” the conductor continues, “so please brace yourselves.”

At the tap of another button, we shoot forward. The rush is exhilarating but I’m too concerned about the drip-drip-drip of water to enjoy it.

“Stop!” the other conductor booms.

The one in control hits a button to halt us.

As we slow, I see four more sharks — but this time they’re not around us or above us, like the first. This time they’re in a threatening formation, directly ahead of us.

“They’re robots,” I tell Rob. “Don’t worry.”

He nods. “Yeah, big sharks don’t swim together like that.”

So rational for a kid, I think to myself.

I study the conductors for tells. They’re acting worried, but maybe they’re just good actors?

It *would* make sense for the best actors to be here, in the most expensive and exclusive ride at the whole park.

The water is still dripping in, which I'm still naturally worried about, but I don't think the conductors would have stopped here to continue the show if there was any real problem.

All of a sudden, incredulous gasps fill the train once more. Rob's is loudest of all. While we're facing down the sharks who are blocking our path, a colossal sea monster appears behind them. I don't know enough about myths and monsters to say what it is, but it looks more Kraken than Loch Ness Monster.

With one effortless movement of a giant tentacle it grabs hold of the sharks and tosses them into the distance. It faces us down for a moment then swims over our heads.

The darkness of the monster's shadow is remarkable, but nothing compared to the detail of its skin as it passes by. The fleshiness is striking, especially compared to the metallic horses I've worked on in Yester Year.

And I say the monster "passes by", but it actually covers the whole of the carriage and stops.

This is the best robot I've ever seen, and I kind of wish I was working here instead of in Yester Year! I mean, the horses are cool... but a sea monster? Sign me up!

The monster stops moving with the train enveloped in darkness, which brings the cold overhead lights from earlier back into business. The lights let us see what it's doing: patching up the damage the shark caused, where the water has been coming in.

Wow.

I know it's not actually fixing it because I'm now sure there was never any damage and the drips were engineered to *seem* like they were coming from outside, but I'll be damned if it isn't convincing.

The monster leaves as soon as it's done, dashing off into the distance.

"I'm very sorry about all of this," the conductor says. "We'll get you to Dream Rock in no time, but since your journey so far has been disrupted, let's start again."

I expect us to move backwards, which would be cool enough, but no... the geniuses behind the Bullet Sub have something else in mind.

We move forward for a few seconds, until forward becomes upwards. The rail, somehow hidden, takes us upside down like a classic roller coaster — only instead of coming down the loop in a circle, we keep going upside down! We go all the way back to the start, which takes around twenty seconds at what feels like mach speed, and then we're right-way-up again and ready to shoot forward.

Some people applaud this remarkable surprise and the remarkable physical sensations it brought, but others look fit to barf. I turn to Rob, hoping to see a smile.

"You're the coolest sister ever," he beams, panting in exhilaration.

He's probably still smiling when we shoot forward at the fastest speed yet, but we move so fast that my head shakes a little bit and his does, too.

We move further than last time but we also move even faster than we did on the loop back, so it takes around the same time.

This time we reach our destination without any interruption.

We emerge from the water, into a dock at an above-ground station. The rail takes us up an elevated track until we stop at a spot with an utterly incredible view of the whole island.

Everyone in the carriage gasps all over again, this time taking in the scale and wonder of everything this remarkable place has to offer.

"Welcome to Dream Rock," the conductor says, pressing a button that causes the glass ceiling of our cylinder to recede into a previously discreet recess. I can hear various kinds of music playing low in the distance, providing a perfect backdrop to the hubbub of excited visitors.

As everyone starts filing out, Rob steps towards one of the conductors with a question: "Say, mister... was *all* of that supposed to happen? You seemed pretty scared when the water started dripping!"

"I'll give you two tips to enjoy your day on Dream Rock, kiddo," the man replies with an evasive smile, winking at Rob as he speaks. "Remember that nothing is fake, and always expect the unexpected..."

I've had good days that seem to pass quickly, but nothing like this.

Rob has been having the time of his life since we stepped into the Bullet Sub and it feels like every minute has brought another gasp of wonder. It's really the first chance I've had to wander around the island too, since my work is always in the Yester Year zone and there's never enough time on my breaks to see much else.

I say "wander" around, but to be honest we've been on a pretty set route from the minute we got here. Rob has the official Dream Rock app on his phone and has been using it to move as efficiently as possible between the attractions he highlighted as his Must Sees.

I'm less of a planner but I don't mind — it's his day.

His birthday is in a couple of weeks so this timing worked out well, but I would have given him my second ticket, anyway.

When Dream Rock opened for business it was a huge deal, especially with us living so close by, and Rob did a big school project on it. He knows all about the island's dark history as a site for executions and later for quarantining (AKA abandoning) people who had diseases they didn't understand yet.

Rob got really into the supposedly mystical nature of the island, too. For a long time before Dream Rock came to be, Brown Island was a mecca for

hippy types who talked about some kind of vortex and said they experienced odd sensations.

A lot of boat tours used to come and land out here — day trips for people with more money than sense, I'd say — and the package always came with stuff like chakra readings and whatever else they were into.

There's an old guy called Chuck Baskins who got especially famous talking about that stuff, and if I tell you his name is the least crazy thing about him then you'll probably start to get some idea.

Baskins campaigned to block development on the island because he said it was a "unique focal point of energy fields we don't yet understand." But money talked, like always, and Dream Rock is now a focal point for the most advanced technologies on Earth.

Rob is majorly into science, even more so than I was at that age, but his mind is a lot more open to mystical stuff than mine is — or ever was.

I believe what can be observed and I'm sure he'll come around to that way of thinking in his own time.

Whenever I get home and see him reading a book about time travel or energy fields, I don't tell him to put it down because *I* don't believe what's inside. I'm just happy he's not killing brain cells on the stuff most other boys his age are doing.

Through all the fun of the day, I know that what he's been looking forward to most is time-travelling back to the world Yester Year.

We didn't have a lunch — "we can't waste time eating *twice*," as Rob wisely said — but we grab dinner in one of Astro City's space-themed restaurants at 5pm. This is peak time but our table is reserved and we've already ordered in advance, so everything runs smoothly.

The planetarium dining experience is incredible and I don't mind that I have to keep reminding Rob to eat his Martian Meatballs before they get cold. Even I can hardly keep my eyes down, and I'm not as obsessively interested in space stuff as he always has been.

We get out just before 6pm and follow Rob's map to his highlights of Yester Year. *The* highlight is the 7pm show in the amphitheatre, where we