

Eternity is 20 Seconds Long by Paul Trembling

Kev adjusted his position in the hammock, just enough to look round.

Beyond the shade cast by the trees, the beach was ablaze with sunlight. The glare from the white sand would have been painful if it hadn't been for his sunglasses. Even with them, the flicking pinpoints of light from the sea stabbed sharply into his retina.

There was still ice in the bucket, though, and the drinks were cold.

Along the beach, he could see the girl coming back towards him. The bright orange bikini glowed against her tanned skin. She waved.

He'd promised her a special experience. She didn't know how special it would be. They would have the time of their lives. A very long time. He waved back.

Everything was perfect. Now was the moment.

The device resting on his chest looked like an irregular collection of cylinders, in several different shades of red to purple. The interface unit attached to the side was a crude human intrusion, but necessary. He picked up his PalmPC, linked in to the interface, brought up the programme.

Took a deep breath and hit go.

The rush of alien symbols across the screen was as expected - but surely that configuration was wrong? Alarmed, Kev reached a finger to the abort icon....

DISCONTINUITY

"That's the loop point."

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"How come he doesn't see us?"

"Different time streams. We weren't there then."

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"What about the girl?"

"Outside the field, fortunately. If he'd set it differently, she'd be in there with him."

"How big could it have got?"

"We're not sure. Perhaps the entire planet."

He'd promised her a special experience. She didn't know how special it would be. They would have the time of their lives. A long time. He waved back.

"What was he trying to do?"

"We're not sure. Extend his holiday, perhaps."

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"What is that thing?"

"Temporal field node. Part of a star-drive. Isha'hassat technology."

"How did he get hold of it?"

"That's being looked into. There's quite a black market in alien tech, but this is new. The Isha'hassat are upset about it."

He picked up his PalmPC, linked in to the interface, brought up the programme.

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DISCONTINUITY

"So what happened?"

"He set up a self-perpetuating temporal loop."

Kev adjusted his position in the hammock, just enough to look round.

"Can we stop it?"

"No. The controls are inside the loop. No one from outside can reach them."

Beyond the shade cast by the trees, the beach was ablaze with sunlight.

"So how long does it last?"

"Twenty seconds. Twenty point two five to be accurate."

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"No – I meant how long will it last? The time-loop-field thing?"

"From his point of view, twenty seconds. From ours – eternity."

There was still ice in the bucket, though, and the drinks were cold.

Along the beach, he could see the girl coming back towards him. The bright orange bikini glowed against her tanned skin. She waved.

"But what happens if the sun explodes – or something like that?"

"If the sun explodes in five billion years, will that affect you?"

He'd promised her a special experience. She didn't know how special it would be. They would have the time of their lives. A long time. He waved back.

"No."

"And it won't affect him either. For the same reason. He's in a different time. Always."

Everything was perfect. Now was the moment.